

IN A Southern Closet



J. Robin Whitley

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by

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The names of most individuals have been changed and identifying features, including physical descriptions and occupations, of other individuals have been modified in order to preserve their anonymity. In some cases, time lines have been skewed or compressed in order to further preserve the privacy of all mentioned. The goal in all cases is to protect people's privacy while at the same time acknowledging the vital part each person plays as part of the story.

Dedication

Dedicated to all people still living in the closet and praying for light. There is hope and you are not alone.

Preface

THE WOMAN IN front of me at the bank sneezed so I offered, “Bless you,” though she was a stranger to me. She turned to look at the person who spoke, smiled shyly, even a bit apologetic. As she turned back to wait, I saw on the back of her shirt for the first time the name, “Bethel.” Her royal blue tee shirt didn’t explain if Bethel was a school or a road, but just seeing the word and the rustic design set my mind on a road trip of memories.

Bethel Road in Oklahoma led to nowhere but red dust and cowboys. Bethel Baptist church in Locust, North Carolina was near my hometown where my nephew had his first piano recital. The road past the church, Bethel Church Road of course, was the road to another church where I first worked as a music and youth director and was later ordained at St. John’s Lutheran in Mt. Pleasant, NC.

The word Bethel comes from Hebrew scripture and is actually a composite of two words Beth (pronounced ‘bate’) meaning “house of” and El is the shortened form of Elohim, one of the names used to address God in Hebrew Scriptures. Bethel literally means “house of God.”

I began this book shortly after seminary graduation with the intention of discussing the challenge of being in the religious closet in the Bible Belt. As I received my first call, the writing time turned to sermons and Bible study. In October 1997, I was removed from the roster of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) for coming out to my bishop. My decision to be open and honest as a leader in the church was a choice I thought I was prepared to take on in all its fullness. I did not truly understand or anticipate what excruciating pain would be part of the truthful path. As I started a new book dealing with the pain of being defrocked, I decided to call it *Souls in the Wilderness*; for all gays and lesbians who choose to be open and follow a Christian path, the wilderness is very real.

In the past few months, I picked up my manuscripts again and began to see that the importance of the material was the story as a whole, not a story in pieces. As a result, I’ve taken my manuscripts, journals and writings and put them in order. I cannot say that I am proud or happy for the mistakes I made and the people who I hurt accidentally in my quest to find my own truth. I have tried to leave the writings in original form which was not always kind or holy or good. Looking back I can see these are the chapters of my life as I age, grow stronger in God and faith and hopefully learn something from my ignorance or mistakes.

It is my hope that you can see growth as it happens in my story. The truth is, I'm still learning, still growing. These new chapters in life do not mean that life becomes easier or that there is no anger any more. Our world continues to change but suffering will always be a part of the human condition.

An orthodox priest once wrote that Christ died on the cross to empower us to walk "through" the suffering of our lives and know we are not alone.

I've titled this book *In a Southern Closet*, because my viewpoint has always been as a Christian in the South who is also lesbian. The best part in writing, however, is to discover that there is more to the story than a closet. There is a "Road to Bethel" because all along this has been about me trying to find a godly path in my life. Each human is also a soul and the journey in this life, after all, is a spiritual path, a spiritual journey of walking to and living in the "house of God." The house of God is much larger than a building, more powerful than the dogma of a religious institution. Best of all, this journey is a journey of promise for we are never alone even in the most desolate places. God comes to dwell with us, for the house of God is everywhere you are. God's peace on your journey.

Solo Deo Gloria, J. Robin Whitley

In A Southern Closet

Southern Closet

Hooowee! Sure is hot in here. Humid hot air stifles me like the sweaty Baptist preacher preaching hellfire and brimstone in my face. The preacher is mean with bad breath.

I am in a southern closet. Surrounded by clothes of religion the smell of moth balls, unbearable incense. The closet heat closes on my face like a plastic bag. I try to find a place for me, a place to breathe. I see the Bible belt on the wall and remember the times I've been whipped to bleeding with that belt.

I'm being punished even now. Have to stay in the closet. Not a good girl. Lesbian. Homo. Don't dare be lesbian and live in the south. Don't dare be gay and want religion. Don't dare be homosexual and desire God. It's unnatural.

Pregnant and barefoot is what a woman is supposed to be in the south. Not lesbian. Shotguns and tobacco is the makeup for a real man looking for life in the south. Don't be gay.

The only way you're to flip your hand is to give passersby the bird. Tell them to go to hell. Well. We're there. All the gays and lesbians that is. Suffocating in a southern closet is as close to hell as you gonna get.

Fact or Fiction

Fact or Fiction was a television show with different stories in the course of the evening, but with only one of the stories as the true story. This show comes to mind as I look back on my childhood seeking to discern which memory is fact or fiction. In review of my childhood, it is not that I was a person who lied or that my family lived in this manner. The problem lies in the eyes of a child, the innocence and lack of understanding therein.

There is nothing wrong or unacceptable with the eyes of a child, but truth and fiction can be distorted to where even the wisest have difficulty in discernment. Add to that adult understanding another reality. Looking back, I can see that I was an oversensitive child. Because of this, my memories are further distorted and as much as I want to tell the truth here, the truth is relative (I wonder if that is some type of Freudian slip). Irony was lost on me as a child and I am ashamed to say was even a concept I did not grasp in my high school advanced English class. Alanis Morissette had not written the song, *Isn't it Ironic*, yet (was she even born?) so there were no good examples and the descriptions given by teachers made no sense to me. I was pretty much a “say what you mean and mean what you say” type of child. As a result, I didn’t get jokes, tongue in cheek humor or sarcasm.

I remember as a young child watching a commercial for “Joy dishwashing detergent” and realizing that was my first name, “Joy”. I turned to mom immediately and asked if she named me after dishwashing detergent. She calmly said, “Yes, Robin. I named you after dishwashing detergent.” I did not hear a laugh or understand the smile I heard in her voice to mean humor. I thought what she meant was true, so for years I hated my first name. Who wants to be named after dishwashing detergent even if you are a squeaky clean young Baptist girl? Finally, I reached the age where it all clicked and I understood and even loved the dry humor, puns, double entendre and other word plays that can be quite fun. It must have been college before it was clear to me that mom was only playing and making a joke but, as a serious minded and literal child, I had taken her words to be the ultimate truth.

I tell you this story to show two things; one that I have always been on the path in the direction of telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The second thing is that while my family was (and still is) big on telling the truth. They loved to make jokes, laugh and tell stories. Those things told to me

were not lies and no cruelty was meant, but as a child, how does one discern innuendo? Perhaps I'm trying to protect my family from the harsh realities they already know. My mom worked for the FBI so it's not as if she had an unrealistic vision of the blessing and kindness of humanity. It continues to appear I was the only person who continued to follow a naive path of trusting humanity. This is my way of saying that, as I write, all I have is my perception. Whether that perception is right or wrong, true or distorted, only God knows. I am at the point in life where I can accept the fact that no matter how hard we try or how much we all may mean well, we make mistakes. Nobody's perfect and isn't that the good news? None of us is perfect. We make mistakes and God loves us anyway. That in itself is a miracle. One I hope to grasp as a reality for me and live a life showing that reality to others. I'm not there yet, but this is the road to Beth-El and anything is possible.

Writing the Life of a Lesbian

The first time I tried to write about the life of a lesbian, I realized I didn't have a clue what that meant for me. I had no clue how others understood "the lesbian lifestyle". There is so much assumed by society about what it means to be a lesbian that there is a disconnection for those of us who are not all that. My life and all the lives of those I call friends are conservative. We are so boring nobody wants to write about us.

When I first decided to write fiction it was because I wanted to write a novel that would show us for who most of us really are. I was only a few chapters along when I realized that nobody would read the book unless trying to sleep. The majority of us are so common and ordinary that we blend into the background of life until something occurs where blame needs a place to rest.

Even years after being dismissed as a pastor, trying to live openly, the only life I knew was the life of the straight person. The straight person's view of the world. How would life be different through my own eyes? I wanted to know what it meant to be me, to be the good person I know myself to be and accept and know the darkness that lies in my humanity, just as it lies in all humanity. Again, I was face to face with illusion, a challenge of discernment of what was what and who was who.

There is this new path these days of admitting and allowing that I know nothing of my life. If that is so, if I cannot even write out my own truths without some hazy confusion of doubt and disbelief, then how can I truly seek to tell my life story that is an encounter with other confused, imperfect, human beings? Writing through the pain was easy, the pain so vivid and real there was no mistake as to what was real and true. Once hopeful life began to return, there was no mistaking God's action in the goodness and redemption. If only I could return to that child view of the world. That's the beauty of children though, they can see things we cannot and whether it is the beauty or tragedy of a thing, we can't be quite clear, but as long as we listen, they will one day learn the truth and maybe they will teach us to remember the magic.

The Dreams of Children

"Dreams are necessary to life." Anais Nin

The dream of a perfect place began somewhere down at the water trickling between my grandfather's pasture and that of another farmer's pasture. In our neck of the woods, that small body of water was called a branch (brainch is how my grandparents pronounced it). My sister and I couldn't wait till we could walk past the purple plum, crepe myrtle, and pecan trees in the spring. We would stop to look in the hen house, and then walk into the barn to see if there was something new. We might climb the boards up into the hay loft and take one jump from the loft to the ground. Each time we landed our feet and legs hurt from the impact and we knew why mama and deddy didn't want us up in the loft and would be mad at us if they knew we were jumping out of the loft. So, we would jump once from the hayloft then get back on the road to the branch.

We would stop at grandpa's tractors; the big John Deere sat dusty in the tractor shed. They were twice as big as Grandpa Poplin's old red International, but dusty with spiders. The branch was calling at that point. We were halfway there. Down the road from the tractors, the road bent right past the back field and to the left of the lower pasture. When the road was no longer grassy, the trees shaded the path and we knew we were near the snake pond and took careful steps, wary of any movement nearby. We never could go to grandpa's pond. That was a rule and a warning, "They's copperheads in that pond," said deddy, "and if I ever catch you near it you'll never go down to the brainch agin." We loved the branch so we steered clear of the pond. Neither of us was fond of snakes.

My sister and I were as different as night and day, but we both loved the branch. Tracy loved the rocks and usually took up a couple right away, though along the water as we walked downstream, she would eventually drop them, tired of the weight in her little hands. I loved the coolness and the sound of the water as it carved its way through the earth. We walked silent as sprites, following the branch down to the barbed wire fence marking grandpa's property. While we were at the branch, I was in a world of my own, one where I belonged.

Family

Our family has been in the United States since before the country had a name. Okay, so they called the place “The New World” or “The Colonies”, but our family landed here before this country was called America or the United States of America. Our family’s earliest ancestors arrived around 1607 in Jamestown, so most likely they were poor laborers or indentured servants.

Historically our family has been weavers (mill workers) and farmers. There are artists thrown in the mix, which always makes a family tree interesting, but in our case, we are rather boring or at least ordinary. Most likely of Welsh and English lineage, our families left Europe probably because they were too poor to make it in England or because they were too religious to make it and hoped for something better here. Researching the migration patterns of my ancestors shows they travelled down the Cherokee, Saponi and Catawba Nation’s Great Trading Path (also known as the Occoneechee path) to the Piedmont area of North Carolina. Once settled in North Carolina (that looks like all the other places in Wales and England) they stayed there without much movement until 1820. Even now, hundreds of years later, the Whitleys and Poplins mostly reside in North Carolina.

Whitley means “white field” or “wheat field” and Poplin apparently comes from the cloth worn by the bishops of Avignon, France. The Poplins were the weavers of a special blend of silk and wool known as Papalin (papal linen) and upon coming to the New World the spelling of the name changed.

When looking at the ancestors of our lines, there are saints and sinners just as there are those in all families. We were a rural family living in the rolling hills of the Piedmont in North Carolina. We have talents in music; love a good laugh and most of us are good in languages and art, with the others being engineering types. We tend to like order and predictability and are hard workers who grow gardens or tend fields.

No, this book will not be about my entire family, but the makeup of a family is important to know, for if you don’t know the face of our family, you won’t recognize them in real life. The face of our family remains one that tends to be conservative in religion, politics and finance. Stubborn to a fault, both families are hardworking country people, live good lives and live long lives with an emphasis on children and grandchildren. While I do have some of the traits of my family, my goals in life have always been different with my emphasis on art

and spirituality. I was out of line with family order. I had no desire to be a mill worker, secretary or farmer's wife. That was not who I was then, and not who I am now. While that still breaks my parents' hearts, they are beginning to see that perhaps this was not a fate meant for me. Yet, I am still from this family and somewhere I am part of them and they are part of me. Which is truth, what is illusion and where do we all fit in as family? The family jury is still in session.

Different

Mom and I were watching a television movie with Bill Bixby. The movie was radical for the day since it was the late sixties. Bixby played a gay dad coming out to his son. I sat in my dad's recliner and as I listened to Bixby's confession I asked my mom, "that's like us right?" I will never forget her face as her mouth dropped open and then with great disbelief exclaimed, "NO! We are not like that! We're het-er-o-sexual!" Still ignorant of the implications I quickly reached for the new encyclopedia to get a better grasp of the two terms. As I read the descriptions, I knew I was in trouble because it was at that point that I realized I was "different."

Being different can be a gift, but only later in life, when you have a bit of wisdom. For a child, being different is not a gift. When you are a child developing mentally, emotionally and physically, different is not who you want to be. Since I believed in God, I felt I could change because God can do anything if you believe. It was then that I attempted to change the core of my being; it was then that hell began.

I grew up like any other adolescent who was unsure of who I was apart from family. I was extremely self-conscious, longing for something more, but still afraid I was weird, especially since I had a secret to keep. I liked a few boys and found out sometimes I could even kiss them so I prayed, somehow, some way, God would change me to be like everybody else. Until I wrote that last sentence I forgot how alone I felt; to be young and to have no one, no one but God, was hard for a teenager.

Naturally, it was at this time that I became religious. How could it have been helped? God was the only one to whom I could safely turn. I read my Bible and knew God was a loving God and I could talk to him (God was only male in those days). My baptism was a powerful experience and led me to become more serious in my faith journey. I prayed, I shared my faith, and grew in knowledge of scripture. Whenever I talked to God, I always felt loved and affirmed for who I was regardless of all the harsh condemnation I heard around me. I wish I could say that knowledge gave me the courage to stand up and say, "This way of treating people is wrong, to condemn another is wrong," but I was only a child and my thoughts on God did not matter. I was afraid, so I remained silent.

At the same time as this, I dreamed of having a girlfriend as much as I prayed for God to change me. My thoughts were puritan because I was

extremely religious, modest, protected and shy. As a good Southern Baptist, I knew that to mess with sex was to face death by the wrath of God, so I knew better than to think of it. I dreamed of holding hands, kissing, just being in love and faithful to the one of my dreams. We would date, go to church, settle down in a nice country home and be integral parts of our community. Looking back, I can see what a blessing the blindness of youthful dreams had been, for if I had known the difficulties that awaited me I would have lost my soul to despair. I have gotten off track from the story. There is so much to tell you about the wonderful things God has done in my life. Their wonder can only be understood in the shadow of the pain of my life. Because of this, there will be times when it seems as if I've lost track of the story, when in reality, I must stop and tell you the color of my pain or the color of my joy as this journey progresses. For without one the other is not truly a reality because in this life pain and joy go hand in hand.

Dear God,

It all seemed so simple then. To love God with all my heart, mind and soul; to walk in the sunshine of God's love and acceptance. I remember walking down a country dirt road and being warmed by the summer sun. In that moment I knew you loved me. I felt your love wrapped around my being like a mother enfolding her beloved child. Oh what I would give to feel that love again. God hear my prayer.

"Jesus loves me, this I know..."

The song started early in my life. I remember singing when I was in the nursery at church. One Sunday, Mr. Clarence, our Sunday School teacher, came over to me and in gentle kindness removed the rubber band that I had wrapped tightly around my wrist. "Don't put that around your wrist," he said. "See how it makes your hand turn blue?" I think that is how I got my image of God as a kind, gray-haired old man who wanted to keep me safe. The song of Jesus' love played throughout the beginning years of my life as a growing Southern Baptist. The Baptist church was good at Christian Education and Pleasant Grove Baptist Church did an exceptional job of providing teachers for us.

As I sit and remember my childhood, I can remember being in each classroom and that I had an enjoyable experience. The only reason I did not like church was that I had to wear a dress (during the sixties it was still not acceptable for girls to wear pants to church, at least not in the rural south). Because of my intense hatred for dresses (they also got me in trouble with mother because I would sit on the front row and not keep my legs together), I often told my mom, "I don't wanna go to church." She would remind me of this later when I rebelled in the opposite way of going to church more than they wanted.

Growing up my favorite Bible story was the one about the woman with the hemorrhage. In the Children's Storybook that mother read, there was a picture of an older woman reaching to touch the hem of Jesus' robe. I also liked the picture of seeing Jesus baptized by John in the river. While mother did read an occasional bedtime Bible story to my sister and me, my experience with the Sunday School at Pleasant Grove was the most influential part of my spiritual development in the early part of my life. There in those rooms with the stories and music, is where I learned the stories of faith in Word. I did not listen as well to preaching unless there were good stories being told, but I loved music and would listen to the songs of the worship service, Sunday School was filled with stories and songs, both of the Bible and of people's faith experience in modern times. The Holy Spirit worked through those moments to lead me to seek Baptism in the fourth grade.

Being a Baptist meant that one had to profess one's faith and "accept Jesus into your heart." Once that profession of faith was made and Christ accepted, the pastor set up a baptismal date. I was baptized at age nine along with my entire

fourth grade Sunday School Class. We ended up being in the local newspaper because the entire class was baptized. That however, was not the most important part of my baptism.

While I understood that to be baptized was an important step towards God, I did not know that it would change me. On the night of the baptisms, we got ready by pinning down our plaid Sunday dresses. The girls had to pin their dresses down so that they would not float above their head in the baptismal pool. We also practiced what Preacher Brooks told us about entering the pool. We were to take his wrist and hold on tight. He would ask us a question, but make it personal, "Robin, do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" After we gave our answer, he would place a clean white handkerchief over our nose and then say, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." We were then to walk out the other side of the pool where our mothers waited for us at the top of the stairway.

As I approached the baptismal pool, I was filled with fear. Not at the thought of accepting Christ, but at the thought of being held under the water while he said, "Father, Son and Holy Ghost." It was only a brief moment and it takes longer to write those words than for the preacher to say them. I was scared nevertheless. At that time, I did not swim and was afraid of water. When I walked down for my turn, it did not help that the water came up to my neck when I walked on my tiptoes. When I saw Preacher Brooks standing there in his waders it eased the tension a bit to know his secret of staying dry while the baptismal candidates came out all wet. That did not last long. He asked me my question and I responded with my, "Yes." He plunged me into that deep dark water and I came up drenched to the bone. As I walked out of the water, I felt the heaviness of water in my clothing, but there was lightness in my soul. I do not know what happened. I only know that I was changed. Something was different in my life from that moment on.

I became religious after my baptism. I was not particularly bad though I did lie occasionally, but after my baptism I repented of my evil ways (I had shoplifted a crayon and two markers, got caught each time and lied about my birthdays in first grade to sit in the pretty red birthday chair). I sought to be the best Christian I could be.

My mom arranged for me to attend camp at Camp Mundo Vista in Asheboro one summer. At first, I was homesick. However, after the missionaries began to tell their stories I became more interested in their stories than in missing home. I also loved morning quiet time. Each morning started out by going outside in nature with our Bible, our journal and a devotional. When the music started playing over a loudspeaker, quiet time was over. I never had enough time. It was

at Camp Mundo Vista (meaning “World Visits”) that my faith took on deeper meaning.

During one of the summers, my Grandmother Poplin gave me a book to read because of my interest in missionaries. The name of the book was *Bill Wallace in China*. It told of Bill Wallace’s mission to China before communism and how his mission changed in the face of communism. Wallace died trying to minister to the Chinese people. I know that reading the book inspired and changed me tremendously. One summer I came back from camp and first stated that I wanted to be a foreign missionary. I spoke with my camp Counselor about it. She was very encouraging. I was so inspired and filled with excitement that I spoke to the Preacher Allen about it when I arrived back home. He encouraged me to share it with the congregation. I was all excited about my call. Because of my excitement, I was bubbling over when I spoke to my mother about it.

You can imagine my disappointment when she turned on me suddenly in anger and said, “You’re too young to know what you’re going to do.” She proceeded to discourage me through her anger. I was devastated and cried for a long time about that. I cried when I told my preacher that I had better wait. I never said another word to my mother about becoming a missionary. However, I never quit thinking about it either.

If I Could

If I could do anything in the world
Without fear of failing God
Without fear of failing you
I would write symphonies that speak of your heart
Tell stories that remind you of God
Paint pictures that tell of the goodness of life and people
Sing songs that embrace you in love.
You know, I can do anything in the world
And not fail God and not fail you
by being true to me
the Gift I was created to be.

Split in Two

In an effort to be a good person, my life began to split in two. One part of me sought to be that which the church and my family wanted, so I pushed the reality of me deep into the shadows of myself, deep into any closet, ditch, cave, tunnel, any dark place where I did not have to be different than everybody else. As I got older, I realized that work helped so that I could avoid dating. Then things began to be a little easier because I had to work and when there was any free time at all, I filled it with church and music. Not a bad way to live except half of me was gone. My soul and mind became divided and my heart torn in two. The teaching of the church was that “self” was bad and I had to be what everybody else said to be a “good” Christian. These phrases were said several times to me in my life and I wanted to be a good Christian more than anything else in this world. After that, I wanted to be a musician and I wanted somebody to love me for me. Life was never about sex for me in those early days. Life was about acceptance of self, being loved and living a life full of loving and serving God.

As I struggled with my identity, the tearing apart began to lead to bouts of deep sadness and sorrow. I kept to myself and wrote poetry and songs about the end of life. Even as a middle school child, some of my poetry was depressing. All the people around me talked about how evil homosexual people were. Was I evil? I tried to put on a good face and still a shadow of sadness followed me. As I entered high school one of my friends from church noticed that I had grown despondent. Suddenly I began getting notes from a “Secret Pal” who always left messages to cheer me up. I so often asked, “Did you put that note in my locker?” and she would say, “But Robin, we were in band together, how could I have done that?” She finally confessed that she had been hoping to cheer me up. She didn’t know what I was battling only that it seemed too hard. Her messages were words of God to me. As my mother interrogated me about why I did not have boyfriends, those messages gave me the strength to hang on to God. I didn’t understand what the big deal was about dating a boy and why it was so pressing and important to my mother. I know now that she saw others my age beginning to date and if I was to be “normal” I should start being more interested in boys.

Even as I hit that adolescent period of growth, my focus wasn’t on sex. After reading copious memoirs and stories of others coming out, I realize that perhaps I was a little odd here. My focus was to be a good person, a good musician and to follow God, so when my body started feeling things, the feelings were weird

and scary to me. When I kissed a boy, nothing special happened and I still couldn't understand the big deal over boys. I once dropped a nice guy I was dating because my friend wanted to date him. Only later did I realize this was heartless to him, but there was no connection there for me. Until I had my first girlfriend, I didn't understand the big deal about dating or why everyone talked so much about being in love.

I can't remember how or where we met, but the thing we had in common was faith. We both wanted the same goal in life and that was to serve God. We began to pray together and talk about one day going to school to be missionaries. Then, one day, she held my hand. That is all. She held my hand and my arm and hand tingled with electricity. I'm not as brave as other writers who totally bare themselves, so let's just say I felt things I could not imagine merely from holding her hand. You can imagine my teenage reaction to a kiss when our lips first brushed. Powerful feelings and emotions raced through my body and my mind exploded on so many levels.

My first love was a religious person. She was constantly in my mind and in my prayers. I wrote poetry and songs. I was in love and so happy I wanted that love to last forever. I finally understood my other friends in a way, but in a bigger way I was set farther apart because I knew I was not only endangering my physical life, but word was out that God would send me to hell.

Through My Own Eyes

In review of my first draft of this book, I saw a big gaping hole in my story. Not an untruth, but there was nothing written about my years in college and the years when I first worked in a church. As I raked my memory, I know that the reason is depression. Each year in high school got darker and bleaker for me. When it was time to graduate from high school, I was ready to go somewhere to discover my life and see through my own eyes. What I didn't foresee was that by moving to a small Methodist college only thirty minutes from home, I only changed living quarters, not mindsets.

While we did have many different people at Pfeiffer College, it was a church affiliated school, in the same county where my family lived. I was a church music and education major with a minor in Christian education. I overloaded my schedule with rehearsals and classes because the first year I tried dating a guy, well, let's say he was excessively friendly.

Throughout my college years I continued to be seen as a physical education major and that confused me because I was a music major and had given up sports in high school for music. I asked some of my friends why people thought that and they said, "You just look like a physical education major." Now I know as a lesbian that I should have been proud that people recognized my athleticism and strength. Then, however, it felt as if everyone could see that I was different. My battle with religious beliefs and the fear of my family's reaction to me intermingled with my identity hidden in the depths of my soul and all I can remember of college is work and darkness.

Yes, I had fun. I can remember smiling and laughing and playing with my friends, but that laughter could not penetrate the wall I was building to protect myself from others. The light of day could not penetrate the fear forming a prison around me. I finally decided to get psychological help.

Pam was my roommate throughout the years and Becky my closest friend. As I write this, it is clear they were angels God sent to get me through college for without them, I can't imagine finishing. The summer before my sophomore year I was hit by a car while riding a bike and there's nothing like coming close to death to make one rethink goals. Pam was a good Presbyterian who put up with all my pranks and she was the only person in college I confessed anything to in my first three years.

When I began to think I needed to drop out of college and go work for God,

Pam was the one who talked with me about how God could still use me in college. I was on the Fellowship Team, Baptist Student Union and I taught a Bible Study in our dorm. She reminded me of these good things. Becky was the one to get me outside of myself to play, ride bikes, do any physical activity rather than feel sorry for myself. I don't think she saw me as wallowing in my depression. She was a good friend and still is to this day.

The counselor mentioned there was a way to help me with the homosexual issue. If I could just try sex with a man he was sure I would be cured. I never went back to that counselor and later discovered he was charged with sexual misconduct relating to another college girl.

By the end of college I had dated one guy my freshman year and one girl near the end of my senior year. The nice Christian girl I dated opened doors to meeting other lesbians. They didn't know what to think of me being so straight laced and religious. I was known on campus as one of the church music majors. Pfeiffer was a small campus and most of us were church related majors, science, business, and criminal justice or education majors. Even on a small Methodist campus in a dry county, college kids tried things. I didn't smoke, drink or do drugs. I didn't go to bars or sleep around. My new lesbian friends kindly took me to a gay bar in Charlotte named Scorpio's. At first, I was fearful since I had heard of bars being raided by the FBI and my mom worked for the FBI. Once they assured me it wouldn't be raided by police or FBI agents I began to worry that I would feel all out of place and make my kind hosts feel I was judging them or looking down on them. I just wanted to see what it was like I told myself. When I walked in the door and saw people like me, it was like coming into Yes. Being in that place with others who faced the same challenges as me was the first taste of self-acceptance. I can feel a deep breath even now from the memory of finding others like me.

As the night at Scorpions went on, it was clear I was still different from the others. Somehow I was set apart. I watched couples dance and soon my friends had me dancing too. The young woman I was dating danced with me, my hosts danced with me, but I declined to dance with the dyke who was drinking heavily. She was a beautiful woman, but there was something I didn't like about her manner. Later that night, while she was playing pool, she hit me with the stick. I didn't mean to reject her by not dancing with her but I didn't trust her. I never would. We went back to campus those of us who thought staying out until three in the morning, late enough. The drunk (she was drunk when she hit me) went home with a stranger. I later learned that some people get mean when they drink and she was one of them.

I made friends with the lesbians who mostly lived in a different dorm at the

time. Not everyone in the dorm was lesbian, but the young women who lived there were cool. They were good to allow me to talk and ask naïve questions about what I saw and heard. I didn't understand men dressed like women (I hate dresses) though I could understand the women dressed like men. After all the cautionary tales my mom had told my sister and me about being wary of strangers, I couldn't believe that anyone would go home with a stranger. The more I listened and asked questions, it soon became clear that many people went to bed with strangers and only afterwards began to make friends and then date. That was backwards in my mind, and I even said so in my disbelief, but the young women were gracious and kind, never judging me. They began to tease me and teach me to laugh at myself.

Because of my new friends, I lost a few others who were sure I had gone wild. Like all people, there were the wild lesbians and there were the just regular people. Soon rumors started that I was getting drunk and sleeping around when I wasn't. I would talk with my roommate about it and she would encourage me to just keep living my life and being myself and to listen to God.

Somewhere in this time, I got into an argument with God and told God that if God was the type who would condemn me for loving someone, then I wanted nothing to do with God. That started the darkest experience of my life. When I think upon it, there is nothing but blackness. It was during this time that I tried alcohol. I did get drunk the first time I drank because there were things I didn't know about alcohol and being a teetotaler before, the alcohol affected me more strongly than others. I learned quickly how to have a drink without becoming drunk for I did not like the feeling of losing control. I wanted to keep control over my body and life. This was the first wild period in my life and it meant I drank occasionally but without getting drunk.

Once when a single friend and I went out, I started dancing with a nice looking woman who was a great dancer. I don't remember how we started to dance because I don't even remember a word spoken between us. We just danced and danced. We had a musical connection and were able to meet each other's moves so that we danced as if we had danced all of our lives together. My ride needed to leave and so I said goodbye to the dancer.

My friend Jean said, "I think she wanted to take you home." I laughed because Jean liked to tease me about things I didn't understand or things that made me blush. She said, "No, I'm serious, I think she really wanted to take you home."

My response was, "I don't know her why would she want to take me home?"

"Well, you go home with her and you'll get to know her."

"You're kidding right?"

“No. Many people do it that way. I don’t feel comfortable going home with someone I don’t know but lots of people do.”

That wild period of my life lasted three months because after that night, I wasn’t interested in the bar even if it meant giving up dancing. I wasn’t picking up a stranger. My mama taught me better than that.

At the same time, I missed my relationship with God and again began talking in prayer and on my way to practice in the chapel one day I felt God’s love surround me like never before. I was dressed as I always wanted to dress, which was butch bordering on dyke, and the love of God poured into my heart like acceptance. I spoke aloud my moment of ‘aha’ saying, “You really do love me just as I am don’t you?” Then I received a metaphysical thump on the head as God conveyed a message, “I’ve been trying to tell you that for twenty one years”. Only then did a bit of light and hope begin to seep back into my life. The lesson was hard and dark but I learned I did not want to live without God and it appeared that God did not want me to live without me.

Seven Years

The number seven is important in scripture and yet, until this moment, I did not realize that the period between my college graduation and entrance into seminary was seven years. As I look at it now, I can see that period as one where God allowed me the room to grow and learn who I was while remembering *whose* I was. I gained enough self-acceptance to believe that God would not send me to hell for loving another woman. While I grew tremendously, the thought of losing family, friends and jobs kept me in the closet. Fear locked the door.

I wish I could say I learned lessons like the author of *Seven Years in Tibet*, but Cabarrus County and the Lutheran Church were nothing close to Tibet or Buddhist thought. When I first got out of college, I worked a day job to pay the bills and worked part-time at a small, wonderful United Methodist church in Rockwell, a small town not far from my college. Since I was not an organist, my job there was a part time position as choir director. One of the women I sang with in the touring choir in college alerted me to an opening at St. John's Lutheran church in Concord. The church is over 100 years old and one of the first and oldest Lutheran churches in North Carolina. The position would be a step up from where I was working with more choirs and a better salary. They would also soon be hiring a youth director and they were interested in my being both the choir director and youth director.

It felt like the Lutheran Church was becoming part of my destiny. I had been exposed to the Lutheran church by my parents' neighbor. During high school my neighbor knew of my love of music and so invited me to visit her Lutheran church's contemporary services at St. Martin's Lutheran church. I loved the service. So once a month, I would attend the early service at St. Martin's, and then leave to go to worship with my family at the Baptist church. I had also become interested in the Lutheran church during college history class. I was impressed by Martin Luther's stance against the wrongs of the Catholic Church and the history of the reformation.

My Call

Vocation is a word whose root is “vocare” and means to “call forth.” In the beginning of seminary, we were all told that the word for seminary comes from “seminal” or meant “seed bed.” We were at seminary to have seeds of faith nurtured and grown but also for weeds to be pulled up (though they didn’t admit to the weeding part which any gardener knows is necessary).

Seminary is hard for any person who enters. In addition to review by a call committee, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) required that each candidate go through psychological testing as well as an IQ test. While I know there are other denominations that have such requirements, I can only speak from my experience. The ELCA in the nineties had four seminaries throughout the US, but I was interested in pastoral care. The Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary (LTSS) in Columbia, SC was the place for those with a pastoral care emphasis.

Before entering this seminary process, I argued with God for four years, telling God repeatedly that the church did not want gays or lesbians so why bother going. I was a church musician who loved working with music and used my ministry there to tell others about God. I kept journals of my struggle with vocation. Then after lots of counseling with my pastor and a counselor about vocation, I had an interesting encounter at a music seminar I attended for my church choir work.

My counselor had discovered the music of the Saint Louis Jesuits [\[1\]](#) whose work covered scripture in a beautiful contemplative way and told me about a nearby workshop for church musicians seeking to use the music. The workshop was set up to teach musicians and laity how to introduce this particular type of music into the liturgy of the more formal types of worship. I already listened to the music as part of my ride to work and it was amazing how that calm, meditative music changed my attitude as I drove in rush hour traffic from Concord to the south side of Charlotte.

As I sat with the others at the workshop, I saw there was no one I knew, but that was okay since I was there to learn and take the music back to the church where I worked. The workshop was a chance to listen to music instead of worry about if I was doing what God wanted with my life.

I don’t remember if this was the first day or first hour, but I can remember the priest’s surprised look on his face as he said, “I don’t usually do this but I

feel compelled to share with you a song written by one of my colleagues, Dan Schutte.”

This is a section of the piece:

“I who make the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright.

Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send....

Here I am Lord. Is it I Lord? I have heard you calling in the night.

I will go Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.”

By the end of the piece of music, I was sobbing so loudly as to be noticed by everyone there. Even now, almost twenty years later the words can bring tears to my eyes. After that day, I said yes to God, yes to seminary and the guidance of the ELCA, but with this statement to God, “I’ll go but you’d better change the church by the time I get out of seminary.” (At the date of this writing, the ELCA is at the same place as before my entrance into seminary and with little movement in twenty years, though I hear things are improved in New York).

St. John’s people had been loving and supportive of my ministry as a youth and choir director. When I started the seminary process I felt the full support of the entire church. Their ministry had made a difference in my life and their prayer sent me on a new journey. It became clear as I started the seminary process that St. John’s and I were on a mutual path ministering to each other and to the larger community. Their support was so strong financially and also in prayer, that it gave me hope that God could change the larger church’s mind to make a place for a person like me in ministry.

As time passed, it was clear that the church was not changed by my going to seminary, but I was changed by God. God’s imprint on my heart grew stronger than ever, even after being removed from my pastorate. I must admit I still have a bit of stubbornness. As I went to preach at a small congregation the other day, the same song I mention above came up on the CD I was listening to and I promptly skipped over it. The ELCA is clear. The church wants nothing to do with me, even if God is still calling.

The Seminary

I had made a bet with God. "God, you change the Lutheran church in four years and I will go to seminary." At the time I didn't know of the trickster God, so when things opened up that appeared God was agreeing to fix things, I went. I passed all the entrance tests. Found my heart open wide to God and on my way to Columbia, South Carolina. Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary or LTSS is a small campus in the city. If you've never been to Columbia, don't go in the summer. I first moved to the seminary for the Greek intensive course in June and Columbia proceeded to become a city listed in the "hotter than hell" category. Having been a country girl, I was sure after living in the urban community of Eau Claire, God had sent me to hell. At the time, I had never lived in a city and had no desire to live in the city.

I had always lived in small towns until I moved to Columbia. Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary (LTSS) was set in an old community, Eau Claire, which had once been a more affluent neighborhood. By the time I attended seminary, the community had become one that lived on the edge of danger. Eau Claire ended up being the best place for the seminary, especially once we all learned that the word "seminary" meant "seed bed" and any gardener knows that there has to be good mulching for anything good and tasty to grow. Nonetheless, I was shocked that shortly after settling in at the campus, the bookstore was robbed. The professors constantly warned us to keep our car doors locked and for the women to be careful going out at night, never go alone. My mom had worked for the FBI growing up and I knew that people did horrible things to one another, but somehow I thought a seminary would have a different atmosphere...and yet, in the middle of all that wild chaos there was a certain sacredness that wafted through the humid air. Still, a murder had happened a block from the seminary. When you were on campus at night, you could hear shots in the neighborhood. One night when I still lived in the dorm, I yelled in fear at God as to why God had put me in such a hellhole as Columbia, SC and shortly thereafter a dove took to cooing above my room.

Six months after my arrival, my savings had run out and I was going to have to find another place to stay. Campus was too expensive along with the books and the cost of seminary. I had started dating someone off campus who lived at her parents' house while working on her Masters Degree, so I asked, "do you think your mom would let me move in?" She asked and my gypsy life began. Of

course, at the time I didn't know it was the start of my gypsy journeys; I was in a religious school to be a preacher. Being a gypsy was the farthest thing from my mind. At the same time, it was important to find a safe place to live.

While living in a city was challenging to me, the other challenge faced was the constant review of identity. The seminary repeatedly asked us to write spiritual autobiographies of who we were, how we thought, what we believed. All seminarians were put under a religious, dogmatic microscope for thorough analysis, and in addition, the ELCA had developed the document “Visions and Expectations for Ordained Clergy” [\[2\]](#). For some of the synods [\[3\]](#), this document became a witch-hunt for gays and lesbians who might have gotten through the psychological evaluation. While I was fortunate that the North Carolina Synod did not call us to task on specific lines of the document, I knew that this possibility existed. At the same time, once I arrived at the seminary, it was clear that I found my path. For the first time in my life, I felt I was where I belonged regarding vocation.

So I endured and wrote my spiritual biographies, met with the bishop when needed, met with the call committee and also spoke with a trusted clergy for prayers as I begged God to change the church or at least show me a way to serve God and God’s people as the person I am created to be. I never lied about my sexuality and I was blessed that no one ever asked me a direct question.

Did I mention how hot and humid Columbia is? The climate and vegetation worsened my allergies and before my first six months of seminary were completed; my allergist had moved me from asthma meds as needed to one used to control my asthma every day. My asthma progressed to the point where I could predict when the weather was to change because I would have an asthma attack. The asthma began to limit my ability to attend group events so I had to choose wisely because the attendance at events was also looked at when seminary was over. While my congregation, St. John’s Lutheran Church of Concord, [\[4\]](#) provided financial assistance for my schooling, it was nowhere near the amount needed to pay for the school, so in addition to study I worked a part time job as much as I could fit into my schedule. I once explained to my classmate I wanted to keep my seminary loan down to a small car payment if possible and her response was, “Heck, I would be happy if I could keep it to a house payment.”

Clinical Pastoral Education

Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE, is a program started by Anton Boisen as a way to educate pastoral leaders through experience. The best understanding of the program is found on the website:

For Boisen, the insight into the living human document, the depth experiences in the struggles of their mental and spiritual life, came from listening and telling story, by listening to the story of the living human documents theology develops ideas with confidence. In the light of the focus on narrative theology; and his new and crisp theological methodology, Boisen's contribution has important theological significance for our time.

Henri Nouwen said: "Although he did not come up with new theological insights, his new clinical approach to these age-old questions gave it a new and fresh articulation, placing it in a relevant context and brought theology back from the 'brain's level' to the 'gut's level.'" [\[5\]](#)

This education was part of the training at LTSS and regardless if the student was Lutheran, Episcopalian, Baptist or Methodist, in order to graduate from the seminary, this course had to be passed. The institutions providing CPE typically have a chaplain as head of pastoral care of the patients such as hospitals, mental institutions, prisons, shelters and other similar types of institutions. Since I had never visited the hospital much, I felt that my training would grow best by working in one. The Baptist Hospital in Columbia accepted me into their program.

CPE occurred the summer after the first year of seminary and all of the underclassmen and women heard horror stories about the program and how hard it was and how the outcome of the course sometimes ended the career of a seminarian. A fellow named Jimmy gave the best advice to me as I asked him about his experience of working at Baptist. He said, "CPE is the most horrible, wonderful experience you'll ever have. Be willing to give in to the program and you will get more than you imagine."

The first thing the supervisor of our CPE group let us know was, "Your issue will find you. No matter where you go in the hospital, your issue will find you." He said this because part of the CPE program was for the pastor in training to obtain self-knowledge about the events of life that might hinder proper pastoral care. The truth of it is that none of us in our group understood quite what he meant until the family with an alcoholic found the person with an alcoholic

parent. The person whose brother died in a car crash got over forty death calls, the intellect kept having patients with cancer of the brain, the rape victim the only one called to the ER for a rape of an adolescent and the one with mental health issues the only one called to or allowed on the psychiatric ward.

Those three months became the longest summer of our lives for not only did we have to face these patients who tapped into our own problems, we then got to dissect our experiences as an exercise with the group and the supervisor.

Being a lesbian in the closet, I was sure that an issue of homosexuality would show up in my sessions, but that wasn't the issue that found me. In order for me to get the most out of the program I decided to bravely come out to my supervisor even though my girlfriend at the time discouraged it and I knew that if I judged wrongly I would not only be thrown out of the program, but also out of seminary and lose my girlfriend. When I came out to the supervisor, he blessed me out for being in a relationship while in seminary, and afterward told all of the summer chaplains that we would be undergoing mental and psychiatric testing the next morning. Immediately after that, we were all to attend a seminar the hospital was giving on homosexuality and clergy sexual abuse.

I panicked and worse, knew I must relay all these events to my girlfriend when I talked to her later that day. When she reacted strongly against me, my world was turned upside down and thus began for me what is often called "the dark night of the soul." [\[6\]](#) Even though the days had brightness, I cannot remember them. Even now, I remember only the pain and fear of that period. My girlfriend was in an uproar that I had come out to the supervisor and would not speak to me that evening. She would not talk to me about what had happened or attempt to see my point of view. She would not pray with me about any of it or attempt to see why I thought honesty was important. We struggled as a couple and she threatened to break up with me.

The next day all five of the chaplains at Baptist Hospital were marched up the stairs to the psychiatric ward for testing. The tests were different from the entrance exams for seminary. These were detailed exams to determine mental illness. We were all afraid and as my colleagues questioned the supervisor's reasoning, I felt like I was walking to the top of Golgotha and I would be the one crucified on that day. The tests were my fault and how could I tell my colleagues that this was happening because I chose to be honest? I was despondent as I took the test as well as fearful. I had poured out my soul about my sexuality and about the sexual molestation that had happened when I was a child. Raw and bare, throbbing with pain, it took every effort to read the sentence much less answer the questions. True to his word, as soon as we all completed the psychological testing, he marched us all down to the seminar on Clergy Sexual Misconduct.

The first issue discussed was the rape of parishioners by clergy. Of course, the topic was quickly changed to the issue of homosexuality in the clergy. As the room talked about molestation, rape and homosexuals, it felt as if I were on trial, as if they could all see me sitting naked there. As the leader of the seminar began to conclude the session, he addressed ways to prevent clergy sexual misconduct. His conclusion sounded like a death sentence as he said, "The only way to prevent sexual misconduct for those who have been abused as children is for the person to be in a healthy, loving relationship." At that point, it felt the church gave me no hope. On one hand they were saying, live an abstinent life. This man stated that if I tried to live that life, I would one day become abusive myself. That was hell rising within my soul. I could be honest, but not a pastor. The church was out to destroy my soul and take away my life by forcing me to choose a healthy relationship or give up my calling.

I did not explain this seminar to my girlfriend. I was choking on pain and fear. She was afraid and cool towards me. This struggle went on for weeks and I was sure that it was the end of us, the end of my good relationship and possibly my future as a pastor or church worker. Due to the attitude in the church at the time, the supervisor had every right and potential to turn me in as a criminal to my seminary and my church. Each day I held my breath wondering what I would lose first, my loving relationship with my girlfriend or my vocation. If I lost my vocation, my family and my home church would also know the truth. The pain deepened into depression. Walking into that unknown was terrifying because I loved my family and wanted to continue to work in the church. My life had turned into a dark night.

I did not know how to handle the constant pain and darkness. Nothing I did or said made anything better. I tried to be present to the suffering and learn of God there, but how? In our New Testament Theology course, we were reading *The Orthodox Way* by Bishop Kallistos Ware. This book is an excellent synopsis of the theology and understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy. I loved the theology because of all the references to the light that he used throughout the book.

However, at this time what spoke to me was his section on the theology of the cross and how it is our salvation:

Such is the message of the cross to each one of us. However far I have to travel through the valley of the shadow of death, *I am never alone*. I have a companion and this companion is not only a true human as I am, but also true God from true God....Christ offers us, not a way *round* suffering, but a way through it; not substitution but saving companionship....[\[7\]](#)

As I wallowed in the pain, fear and sadness, I contemplated this message praying to God for understanding. I went with my girlfriend to a praise service in

her Methodist church in hopes the music would bring relief from the emotional pain that pulled me into the dark. There was no relief in anything or in any song, and as I began to panic in that small church in the low country of South Carolina (read ultra-conservative) my eye fell upon an unusual item for a Methodist church—a crucifix. Most Protestant churches do not have crucifix replicas in the sanctuary because the Protestant focus is on the resurrection so all of the crosses are empty. I could barely see the crucified Christ hidden in the corner, but I did see him when I needed to see. I later discovered the crucifix was a gift from someone's family member in the church and that was the only reason they had it displayed, there in the darkest corner of the church. That was just where I needed to find Christ at that moment, in the darkest recesses of my heart, soul and mind. Seeing the crucifix did not ease the pain I felt, but oddly enough, but it *did* remind me of something, someone greater than myself who would lead me through the valley of the shadow of death, through the valley of my depression if I would just keep my sight on that human who died in the name of God, that one who loves me and all of us other humans on this earth. Little did I understand at that time what an important part this understanding was to play in my life as my battle with depression would later worsen.

Soul Snatchers

My thirtieth birthday didn't bother me at all. Age had never been an issue and I couldn't understand why people were afraid of aging so much especially at such young ages. Some friends wanted to make fun of me, of course, but I laughed them off. I was confident even though the witch-hunt in seminary at the time could be quite unsettling. That would have been 1991, my first year in seminary when the Lutheran Church in all synods sought to rid the church of heretics called homosexuals who dared call themselves Christian. It's not as if I lied to get into the program, it's just that no one asked the right question, which Flannery O'Connor says is necessary.

Nope. At age thirty not one person came out and asked me, "Robin are you a homosexual?" or, "Robin are you a lesbian?" If they had, I probably wouldn't be writing this story, because I am an honest bird. My girlfriend at age thirty was new to me and new to herself as a lesbian. I knew better than to get involved with someone who had not had an "official" relationship and the fact that she was in seminary too didn't make trusting any easier, but I fell for her and her laughter. She could make God laugh and God certainly knew I needed laughter in my life. My thirty-first birthday was harder. For the first time in my life, I didn't like the age I was turning because it was a step towards forty. I remembered as a kid telling my aunt she was old because she was forty. I didn't know any better of course, but it was my kid's point of view that stuck because at age thirty-one the only thing I feared (besides the Lutheran Church) was age forty. The witch-hunt had continued, and a seminary colleague had asked if a classmate and I would sublet her apartment so it would all be waiting for her after her internship. She wanted to study in Israel and wanted us to take care of her furniture while she was away. She left everything in the apartment, even her dirty coffee pot. We each found a drawer to keep stuff in and found a way to sneak a desk with a computer into the living room.

During this time of my life was where the nightmares began. Soul stealing, those were the majority of the dreams. Someone kept trying to steal my soul and I would awaken during the night just in time to suck my spirit back into my chest. Some might have thought my new tendency towards asthma was causing the dreams, but I knew it was something more. Kayla, my friend at the time, didn't want to acknowledge my proclivity towards mysticism and hated it when I talked about psychic phenomena. It wasn't that I wanted to be a psychic, but I

was interested in the early Christian mystics and how God manifests in dreams and visions. Of course, there are instances where they had nightmares and dark nights of the souls, but I was interested in the glory, the visions. I had just begun my study and experience with Clinical Pastoral Education (C.P.E) when the dreams began. I had wanted to work on my Baptist issues since I had been raised as a Baptist.

I was proud of myself for already being ahead of the game by applying where I knew I had issues and that was with the Baptists. The Baptists did a good job of teaching me the Bible and how to pray. I was amazed at how little the "cradle" Lutherans knew of the Bible and was appalled when later a classmate argued with a professor that Jesus did too say, "Jesus only helps those who help themselves."

She was a cradle Lutheran and I the cradle Baptist so I knew she was wrong and the professor told her she was wrong, but she was stubborn. C.P.E. was set up to help us find this kind of problem early on in the seminary process.

Through C.P.E. experiences, I learned that voodoo is still alive and well in low-country South Carolina. When I first came to the city I noticed how much darker the people were than in the Piedmont of North Carolina and I loved it. There was a rich heaviness to the town, not just in the air that we breathed, but the flavor of the town was a rich chocolate. The soil was sandy, but there was a dark layer of earthiness covering the entire city. I hated the crime and the poverty, how the local grocers took advantage of those on welfare by hiking prices, but I loved the new experience. If I am truthful with myself, it was in Columbia where I learned to like a sense of danger.

Nothing could be more dangerous than to be a lesbian going to a Lutheran seminary in the south...unless you add to that the C.P.E. program where the whole point is to find your weakness and dissect the problem. The first sign that my issue might not be about Baptists came when I was assigned to the maternity ward. Of course, for women to get pregnant they have to have sex with men so I quickly became concerned that my homosexuality was going to be an issue. My original plan had been to address the dogmatic indifference of the Baptists towards differences and their inability to see God's love in all of life. Even as a little Baptist, the "Plan of Salvation" sounded like a recipe for one cold serving of religiosity rather than a spiritual path. These were the issues I wanted to face and I also wanted to prove to the Lutheran Church that I was not a good Baptist, but good at Lutheran Theology. Seems so silly and petty now that I have to laugh aloud. Baptist dogma and Lutheran theology were the least of my issues. I soon found that out.

The stint on the maternity ward tended to be boring. The patients didn't stay

long and it was hard to build up relationships with the people because once the baby was born they went home. It was rare that a woman was in the hospital longer than 48 hours and if she was there longer than that, then the baby was in danger of some sort or she was healing from a c-section.

The new parents were enthralled with the new baby and it was hard to walk in on this new family intimacy. At that point, I realized how much I hated hospital visits. The high turnover of patients began to wear on me so that I dreaded each day of meeting new people.

The first new thing I learned about myself was the depth of my introversion. There were two places I could hide when I needed rest from the people, the bathroom of course and the chapel. In a Baptist Hospital, there was hardly ever anyone in the chapel. Once, a man did come in and he was very afraid. He wanted to talk to me since I had my collar on signifying my priestly presence. He kept repeating, "She's hexed me," and then would mumble something I couldn't understand.

When I got home that night, I called my friend, Angie to ask her take on the man's story. Angie worked at the State Mental Hospital and she told me about the voodoo religion of South Carolina. When the slaves were forced to become Christian, many didn't quit the voodoo religion, but only took their beliefs and practices underground with many of the voodoo practices still going on in modern times. At the time, her supervisor, from the mental hospital, was trying to heal from a broken ankle. Angie went on to tell this long story about how the woman's ankle wouldn't heal and the doctors didn't know why, but one of the nurses at the hospital thought someone had put voodoo on her. When the nurse asked questions about how she broke her ankle, the supervisor told her she walked out of the house and there was a mushroom on her sidewalk that she kicked off her path. When she kicked the mushroom, she fell and broke her ankle. The nurse was sure then that it was voodoo. Someone had cursed her with that mushroom. Finally, the nurse convinced her to have a medicine woman come to her house. The old black woman came with a bag of herbs and in every corner of the house she sprinkled something, said some words, and it was only after that the supervisor's ankle began to heal. The lesson was to be careful around the voodoo worshippers, though no one told us how to tell. The supervisor figured the herbs were an antidote to an herb spread that deterred healing.

The soul snatcher dreams started after a month of walking the maternity ward. Part of the C.P.E. program is not just visitation but verbatim (writing down everything said between you and the patient) and then analysis of the verbatim by the group. Why did you say what you said? Some incident you were sure

didn't show your issues could show your issues in the verbatim. Sometimes you just wanted help in how to handle a difficult person in the hospital room and suddenly you were talking about rape or the premature death of your brother and how did that happen? The soul snatcher dreams began to unravel me even more when they turned into monster dreams. I had dealt with that issue before coming to seminary.

A relative had molested the cousins and me, we accepted that, got counseling and moved on. Somehow, on the maternity ward, he haunted me again and I wasn't planning on babies or having sex with men, no matter what the Lutherans or Baptists told me.

I needed a counselor. The summer was moving quickly and the heat of the summer made the tempers in Eauclair more volatile. Shots. Kidnapping and a carjacking, all out my back door along with the soul snatching dreams. Our issues began to find us. E, the brain of our class, was called to all the people's rooms that had brain tumors. His greatest fear was if something happened to his mind. K, who had been my friend before C.P.E. but not afterward, got all the deaths pretty much.

I was called to three deaths in three months. His death calls were around forty, but his brother had died at a young age. G, she got all the alcoholics in the hospital. She didn't drink, but her dad who she hated did. M was a gay Jesuit who dressed in Calvin Klein and I can't remember his issues. So often, the patterns in his ties worked with the patterns in his shirts that I could not hear him when he spoke. Wonder if that was why he wore the patterns so that people like me would wonder, "Didn't his mama tell him not to wear plaid and stripes together?"

My specialty? My issue? I was the only one called to the rape and the only one called to the psyche ward so perhaps I had two issues. My counselor, Beth, wondered if my relative did more than molest me from the dreams I was having and my fear of men and the maternity ward. I love babies, so I wasn't sure what she was talking about. I love children and wanted to be able to help them. Beth was kind and insightful. Soon I felt safe enough to come out to her and confirm that I was also scared to death I would be thrown out of seminary at any minute. Fear. At every breath, I was fearful. To be at the hospital under a clinical pastoral microscope was excruciating. At the same time, I was learning something.

How can I put into words the beauty of the terror? Once, there was a young woman who birthed a stillborn. Her Pentecostal daddy came in condemning her ways saying that the infant's death was her punishment for not being married. While I watched the woman baptize the baby with her tears of love, I could not say anything to the man. All I was supposed to do was to be there as a witness,

as a comfort to the woman and hopefully a different embodiment of Christ's love. I hoped there would be a time I could talk to her without her daddy's presence, but she became so distraught they both agreed I should take the baby. So I picked up the beautiful infant, wrapped in swaddling clothes and tears and returned him to the nurse with tears in my own eyes. I asked the family if I could do anything or say a prayer and when they said no, I had to leave.

Another newborn came two months early. At seven months, his lungs were not fully developed. For the next month he lived in the neo-natal ward and we prayed for him, watched him, and loved his parents until rejoicing when they took him home.

The nurses were tireless although tired. One nurse was always on call when I was. Seems I saw her caring for those who had heart attacks. One day I walked past a door and saw her sitting in a wheelchair. She'd had her own heart attack from too much work. Kindness. Kindness was prevalent and the most precious medicine in the hospital. There were times that kindness was hard when your issue found you, chased you down the hall or called your supervisor, but kindness happened and therein lived the learning, the sacred goodness, the wonder.

You might ask how an issue can chase you and, if you ask, you can probably bet one is looking over your shoulder even now. In a hospital however, when you are a chaplain, you are considered the representative of God. Not God mind you, C.P.E. wanted to make sure you knew you weren't God either, but that you were the living embodiment of the Good News that Christ is with you in your darkest most painful moment. As a result, if your issue so chose, it could page you, follow you to your office or ask the nurse to send you to the room. Of course, your issue was just as embodied as Christ was. Your issue came in human form in the alcoholic, the rape victim, the cancer patient, the suicide patient who wouldn't die, or the schizophrenic man on the psyche ward. His calls bothered me most for technically, the summer C.P.E. chaplains (considered newbees without enough training) were not supposed to be called up to the psyche ward ever and I was called twice.

I can't remember his name. He was a lean fellow of about fifty who had attempted suicide. It wasn't his first attempt at suicide, but his alter personality, who I'll call Alex, called and saved him again. I asked him who Alex was and he easily said, "Oh he's my other personality." I wasn't afraid of the man, Alex's other half, but it was clear that I was out of my league in the psyche ward. I had told the nurse that she should call the intern chaplain and to this day I can see her nodding her head saying he was out of town and Alex's other half had insisted on seeing a chaplain that particular night. He was afraid of going to hell he said. He

had thought about it there on the hospital bed with his thin, bony wrists strapped down to the side of the bed and he was afraid he was going to go to hell because he had attempted suicide. His fear wiggled in his body even though he was restrained. After only a year of pastoral care and counseling classes, I asked all the questions I could think to ask that would give him room to talk, but I had no idea on how to give him comfort. I wasn't even sure who I was talking to, but somewhere in the midst of the fear and the confusion began to talk about an angel in a church window.

"I like those windows in churches with angels in them. You know which one's I'm talking about don't you? The ones where the light shines in just so and you can see that the angel is glowing and it makes me feel good." At that point, I could see him glow, too. There was peace, and his fidgeting stopped, so we talked a while on angels until he stayed calm. I assured him that Jesus loved him and he wouldn't go to hell. He was soon at peace enough that I could leave. As I got into the elevator, I prayed that was my last call to the psyche ward.

When we had our verbatim on the trip to the psyche ward, no one could believe the event. Not even me, so I was not happy as the supervisor raised his eyebrow when told of the visit. Of course, he asked if there was any mental illness in my family. At the time, I did not know about the great, great uncle who died in Broughton or the great aunt who is mentally ill. I never met the mentally ill great aunt and the family only talked about the craziness of my Aunt Ball, who I always thought was just mean not crazy. My supervisor checked with the head chaplain of the psyche ward and I was assured it shouldn't happen again, but of course, it did.

This time the man asked for me by name. I again sought out the "real" chaplain but again, I had to go. The man picked back up on the topic of salvation and began talking about the subject of how a person who committed suicide would go to hell.

I told him the story of Ted, my dad's best friend from high school, a man who was like an uncle to me. When he committed suicide, it rocked my world. I told him about going to my pastor and our discussion about how we didn't think God would send a man in such pain to hell. Before I left Pastor's office he said with all seriousness, "But Robin remember, he DID turn his back on God." The weight of that sentence settled like an anchor in my heart then and I told the man how it was important for us not to turn our backs on God. No, I didn't believe God would send us to hell for being in such pain, but if we succeeded in committing suicide, it was the ultimate lack of trust in God.

"Do you really believe that?" he asked. "I do," I replied and the truth of it grounded me to the earth, to that place in the hospital. "Then I guess I'd better

give you this then."

He tried to reach beneath his mattress. His wrists were still bandaged though he was no longer restrained. I asked if I could help him but he said, "Nope. Here it is," and handed me a makeshift knife fashioned from a bright green Sun Drop can. My hands were shaking as I told him he did the right thing. He then told me to look in a drawer in the chest close by his bed and in that drawer was another handmade knife from another can.

Neither of them would have killed him, though he could have stabbed someone else and done some serious damage. When I was sure he was peaceful and understood that I never wanted him to kill himself and God would not want him to die, we talked about angels and light again. As I left the ward, I gently handed the knives to the nurse on duty, my hands shaking still. Her mouth dropped open as she said, "He's the reason cans were removed from the psyche ward. He's done this before."

Of course, we processed this again in the verbatim group. I don't remember a thing they asked me or a thing they said because I was still in a bit of shock myself. When I had the chance to talk to Beth about it, she asked, "Have you ever felt crazy?" I'm sure she knew the answer was yes, just because I was a lesbian in seminary. We continued to talk about the feelings of being in the closet in a southern town, the deep longing for God, the feelings of betrayal from family, the feelings, everything has a feeling. Shortly after the call to the psyche ward was when I was called to the Emergency Room (ER). A twelve-year-old girl had been raped and they needed a female chaplain present until the mother arrived. I can still feel my heart racing as I left the office to go to the ER. I had taken my collar off to eat dinner but rushed out to the ER attaching it first to the front button and then snapping that white collar in the back. More often than not people thought I was a nun, but that never bothered me. I would have been a nun if Catholics had liked Baptists. My throat had a lump, or perhaps I put the collar on too tight, but it was July in Columbia which meant steamy hot and I was on my way to console a child who had been raped. I had no idea how to comfort the child.

When I arrived, the nurse briefed me that the rapist was a stepfather. The mother had gone to work leaving the girl with the stepfather. The nurse was telling me the story because the little girl couldn't speak, she had a speech impediment or was unable to speak, I can't remember the detail, but the girl's inability to speak was due to birth defect, not trauma. Of course, this meant it would have been hard for her to call for help when the man was on her. He knew that. The nurse had to go to the next emergency so I went in to stay and wait with the little girl. She was twelve, I remember that, and that she was taller than

my five foot height. She was shy, timid, afraid and sweating in her plaid cotton dress like the one I wore in first grade. I told her who I was and that I was there for her until her mother arrived. I asked her if she would like for me to pray and she nodded her head yes. I can't remember praying though I'm sure I did. What I remember however is that until her mother arrived, we sat in silence looking into each other's brown eyes...waiting for God in the sadness.

For sure, my issue had found me and since we had to do a report of all calls to the emergency room, I knew I would not be able to avoid talking to the supervisor about the girl. He had been exhorting us to become more real in our verbatims, we were playing it safe he said, and he expected us to come to the next meeting with something more than we had offered in the previous meetings. I decided to be brave and use the meeting with the young girl as a verbatim even though the unspoken thing was the issue. In front of my two of my classmates and two new friends, I exposed my relative's deed and how it related to the young girl thinking they too would be willing to bare their souls next. When the next four students continued to avoid their issues, I felt more exposed and vulnerable, but the soul snatchers left my dream—at least for that year.

Spiritual Sharings

I've been drinking a cup of coffee that tastes like France and watching the wind blow freely through the trees. Suddenly I remember a spiritual learning experience. When in seminary I won a scholarship to attend an ecumenical seminar in Strasbourg, France. I was so excited because of my ecumenical background and because I thought I would get to practice the little of the French and German I had learned through the years. I do well with languages so I worked on bolstering up my French and German vocabulary.

Now I must point out that I have always lived in the Southern United States, which means that I have southern ears. If anyone speaks English too quickly, it is hard to understand. I cannot understand people from upper New York. I practiced my French but soon realized that a little French meant nothing when I could not understand where the words began and ended as others spoke to me. Trying to get from the airport to the dorm where the seminar attendees slept was nothing short of a miracle.

The small country girl in big, foreign city got a big dose of culture shock. The first hour in Strasbourg, I cried from jet lag and the realization that I was all alone in this big foreign city. The person who had attended the seminar the year before assured me that the people were very friendly and would willingly assist you in speaking the language. Those people were not in Strasbourg that week. There were kind people who tried to understand me and help me understand them as I sought presents in the toy store for my niece and nephew, but the rest of the town wanted me to only speak in French.

During the seminar, I made a friend with a small German woman named Gisela, who taught French. She was as bad at her English as I was at French and German, but between the three languages and hand signs, we worked out conversations. During one of our free times, Gisela told me of an historic tour of Strasbourg and that there would be an English translator. Would I like to go? I was thrilled. We paid our money and joined the large group outside to begin the tour.

Tour guides speak even faster than local people do because they're trying to tell you a lot of information in a short period of time. The tour guide began to speak in tour guide French going so fast my eyes must have bugged out. Gisela saw my reaction and interrupted the tour guide asking about the English translator. By this time, all eyes were on Gisela and me. The guide quickly

explained the English translator had taken the rest of the day off, but I could go back in and get my money refunded if I wanted. Being a shy person who would rather blend into the background, and being an extremely independent person, I said that I would go along and get what I could out of the tour. All the while, I was trying to fight back tears of embarrassment and fatigue. I never knew your ears could actually hurt from trying to understand and listen. At that moment someone spoke from the crowd, "There's an American here? I speak English."

From the crowd stepped a young woman named Stephanie. She was a French major in America, but teaching English in Strasbourg. "I will translate for you," she said. Already dying of embarrassment, I was also embarrassed to be dependent upon the kindness of a stranger who was younger than I was. I know you can see all of the spiritual growth I needed. Because of being so proud, I told her, "You don't have to translate. I'm working on my French and will listen hard. If I have any questions, I'll ask." During the tour, she was very gracious and briefly and kindly summarized each site as we walked along.

We talked about America and the exorbitant prices in France. We talked about her family and how they would send her things to help. "AHA," I thought, "here's where I can redeem myself. When the tour is over I will get her address and send her whatever she needs." She was giving of herself the entire tour. When the tour ended I said, "What can I send you from America to repay your kindness?"

"Oh, you don't have to do that"

"No really, I want to repay you for being so kind," I pleaded.

"There's nothing I need."

"Isn't there something I can do to repay you?" I asked.

Her response, "Just say thank you. That's all. Just say thank you."

As I walked back to my room, I realized that this young woman taught me the true meaning of grace. God gives us everything we need, when we need it. We don't have to earn it, or prove that we're worthy, or pay for it in return for the grace. God gives to us in great abundance and all that is asked of us is, "Just say thank you."

Internship

The next challenge after CPE was to face a year of internship at a parish. At LTSS, the third year of seminary is the year each seminarian (regardless of denomination) completes a year in a parish under supervision by an approved pastor and congregation. The idea was that after the internship we would come back understanding our weaknesses in parish ministry and then take courses accordingly.

As a lesbian and in the closet, I was considered a single person. At the time, my girlfriend was also of another denomination and from a different state. I understood that this meant I could be sent anywhere in the United States. When we applied for internship the coordinators of the program sought to match needs of congregations up with the ability of the seminarian. You could state your preference, but if you fought for a particular place then you were shooting yourself in the foot in the eyes of the seminary, the call committees and the synods. When asked where I wanted to be sent I only stated, "Anywhere but Florida." I said that because I had been to the flatland of Florida and its hot humid places were probably hotter than Columbia, SC so I thought that was the worst place I could be sent. That is until they told me I was going to Mandeville, Louisiana, just on the north side of Lake Pontchartrain.

The only description I remember hearing about it was, "It's the armpit of the south, hotter than Columbia. You can get off the plane and you'll be drenched in sweat immediately."

The pastor from the church there flew up to Southern (another name for our seminary) for the meeting set up for our training. These meetings were to get us acquainted with each other, learn something about the congregation for the seminarian and for the pastor to get a sense of the gifts of the seminarian. I wasn't excited about going to Louisiana because of its reputation for being so conservative. In addition, my asthma had worsened in Columbia to the point where humid climates were suffocating. In order to get to the fish at Columbia's zoo, I had to run through the rainforest section so I would not have an asthma attack.

My girlfriend at the time pressed me to change denominations to avoid separation and a long distance relationship, and I couldn't understand her position. She had to do what her church required and so did I and we both wanted to serve God above all. Even after all of this, when the pastor arrived, I

was not excited about the assignment, but tried to be gracious. Things appeared to be okay until I reacted to his statement that one of the congregation's favorite activities was a regular gathering where they had shrimp jambalaya and kegs of beer. The old Baptist in me had just gotten used to the drinking on the seminary campus, but I still wasn't prepared for this and as much as I loved shrimp, I was allergic to it and hated Cajun food. I did not share this of course, but it was clear that I was not a good match for this congregation.

As a result, I should not have been surprised when the night before I was to leave, I called the pastor and he said, "Oh, didn't they tell you? We decided we couldn't afford an intern this year." Well, NO they didn't tell me. The next day I quickly called the internship supervisor to ask him what was going on. He apologized that he didn't call me but he was trying to have an alternate church for me before he called. It seemed a congregation had come open because one of my classmates had dropped out, the only problem, "It's in Florida."

St. Stephen's Lutheran Church Tallahassee

I could not believe what God was doing to me. I called it the joke God played on me. I still call that experience God's great joke, but I know this now, *God always knows better than me what I need*. When I can follow in spite of my qualms, "all things work out to the good for those that love the Lord." [8] There was no way I could know what God had planned, but as I road the long way through driving rain, through Atlanta to Tallahassee, Florida, I knew God was laughing and pointing at me and telling the angels what had happened so they too were rolling on the clouds laughing.

There is no way to write all the goodness that occurred at St. Stephen's while I was there. A small congregation near Florida State University, they were open, loving, kind, and generous and above all, justice oriented. It didn't take long for me to see these beautiful gifts in the wondrous people there. Shortly after arriving, I had to preach while the pastor was out of town. The pulpit was so large that I had to stack together some books so I could see over the pulpit. The next Sunday, one of the members had built me a preacher's box with a handle. It sits under my feet now as I type.

Throughout the country and the world, there are a group of men that go to various churches called Gideons. These men go into schools, hospitals, churches and hotels and deliver Bibles. Growing up we had a Gideon come to our school that we called "The Bible Man". We always loved The Bible Man because he would get us out of class and we would have a meeting in the auditorium of our old creaky school. We watched as our classmates won free prizes by reciting Bible Verses out loud. The prizes were sometimes a tacky velveteen plaque with a glitter Bible verse on it, or a special reading book. One of our classmates won a trip to a free Bible Camp the following summer. Growing up in the South, the Gideons were well known for their good work and free Bibles. After the Bible Man's presentation was over and we went back to our classes, each desk would have a brand new green New Testament with Psalms. The Bible Man bought us presents and the word. So when the Gideon was announced as the visitor of the day at St. Stephens, I had nothing to expect but presents. Imagine my shock when the organist stood up in the middle of the Gideon's presentation to confront him. The organist was a strong, talented and intelligent person who began hammering the man there about why women could not be Gideons. He stammered and fumbled. She continued pressing him for answers and in the

course of the conversation it became clear that wives of Gideons could attend a husband's presentations, but the wife could not be a Gideon and a single woman (even if she was a business woman) could not represent the Gideons. I was sure that the organist would lose her job, but she didn't. At the end of the service many of the people shook her hand for bringing the topic up and later, the council voted to un-invite Gideons until they offered equal opportunity to women as individuals rather than only as businessmen's wives.

Emory Hingst was the pastor at St. Stephen and had a long reputation as a good and fair supervisor of seminarians. Emory trained in the more conservative Missouri Synod Lutheran Church [\[9\]](#) and was sent to lead campus ministry at Florida State University (FSU). Emory is a fun loving, happy person who also has a serious emphasis on justice. He had always been involved through campus ministry in justice events in Tallahassee. His wife, Ann, envisioned, organized, was the leader of Rainbow Rehab. Rainbow Rehab is an organization that rehabilitates old houses for those in need of housing.

Much like Habitat for Humanity, Rainbow Rehab accepts donations of houses that are viable but need work, moves them to a lot that is donated and then sells them at a reasonable price to families in need. Love, justice and humility are the attributes I associate with Emory and his favorite way of looking at the role of the pastor was, "I'm not the shepherd. I consider myself the lead sheep."

The congregation that grew out of Emory's thirty years of ministry reflected this same message of love, acceptance, justice and humility. As their new intern, called a vicar at St. Stephen, they gave me the freedom to explore my gifts under their acceptance and Emory's guidance. I was allowed to preach, teach and lead the adults, children and youth. They invited me to tell stories at their schools and participate in community activism. If there was a project I wanted to work on they encouraged me. I was surrounded by love and encouragement and I thrived there. God was laughing and soon I was laughing right along with God. To think I knew better than God—what a joke.

The spring of 1992, my world entered another deeper, darker night of the soul. Many events led up to the depression, and St. Stephen proved to be an important part of my path back to light, or at least hope for light. I continued struggling with my call since I was a lesbian and still devoted to my music. The depression set in and again I was awash in darkness of emotion while at the same time surrounded by the light of the people at St. Stephen.

During this time, I was also visiting a nun for spiritual direction so decided to learn from this dark night about myself and where was God in this darkness. Because of what had happened in CPE, I knew that no matter how much more

pain and anguish I felt, God would lead me through this. I had never been in such distress in my life. What made it worse was that I not only struggled with this during my waking hours, but when I could finally get to sleep, I had nightmares about being killed or stalked.

At one point with so much stress and so little rest, I felt as if I was on the edge of insanity. The communion liturgy took on a completely new meaning, the crucified Christ my only companion, my only hope. The Sunday when my life fell apart, we were doing the "Chicago Folk Mass." At one point, we sang a prayer about experiencing what Jesus felt. I found myself chuckling and silently saying to those around me, "you better watch what you're praying for!" That night, after communion, a new thing happened.

I had gone to bed and as usual had trouble sleeping. The last time I looked, it was 2:00 a.m. Around 5:30 a.m. I awoke, completely refreshed as if I had a full night's sleep. I realized that I would not get back to sleep so I decided to get up and watch the sunrise. As I started to turn on the light, I remembered Matthew Fox's statement about the darkness being the "ground of your soul." I thought, "Hey, why not play this darkness thing out?" I left out the lights and began to walk around in the darkness. After a few seconds, my eyes quickly adjusted and it was possible to see. I began to walk into each room in my apartment.

As I walked around, I realized how afraid I was and asked myself why. The apartment was just as safe as it was in the day. The only difference was that it was dark. As I reassured myself, I got braver and looked behind open doors. I symbolically left the closed doors closed. When I looked into my closet, it was the scariest, because it was the darkest place. It seemed silly to be so afraid of clothes and shoes, but I could not walk in there. I could only peek my head slightly inside.

Then I walked into my bathroom. I stood there in the darkness and suddenly, the dripping of the bathtub faucet sounded like water dripping from the ceiling of a cave. I stopped and listened as the sound echoed in the bathroom and thought, "The waters of my baptism drip all the way down here, even into this dark place." Next, I returned to my prayer area and walked out onto my porch into the night. There was little light from the streets. The main light was that of the stars and the moon. It was very quiet except for the night animals—night animals that no longer seemed frightening, only different.

As I returned to my prayer area I realized that the darkness is scary not because it is so dangerous, but because it is so mysterious. Somehow, the darkness changes ordinary things into extraordinary things. As I sat in my prayer space, I heard in the corner of the door a scratching noise. With my senses heightened, the sound was uncommonly loud. In fear, I jumped for the light.

Then I thought, "It can't be that big and whatever it is will be just as afraid of me as I am of it." Therefore, I left the light off and sat in the darkness as I waited for the scratching noise to stop. After the noise stopped and I relaxed, I realized the presence of God in a new way.

God was a presence that was dark, yet extremely warm and tender. There, in my dark fear, was a God fully aware of my fear. There was a God who knew that if I bolted at the sound of what later turned out to be a small bug, nothing, no word could be said to me or I would be gone in a flash. This God was a God that waited for me. When trying to explain it to a friend of mine I told her it was as if I was a wild animal and God was trying to tame me. I am far from tame and still a little bit nervous around this God although I know that I will not be harmed. I have been wild for so long and hurt in so many different ways I tend to be rather jumpy. However, this God never made a move to scare me. This Loving Being simply waited on me in the darkness. I watched this Being with the eyes of an animal waiting to bolt. When I realized that I was safe, I began to watch the night slowly fade into day.

As I watched, I remembered when I had called my niece and nephew from France. It was dark when I called from France, but it was early morning at their home. As I thought, "it must be turning to night in France" I realized that wherever there is a day there is a night and that somehow, the two are connected. Somehow, the two are intertwined so closely that they are as one. As I reflect now I wonder if it might not be how light and darkness are connected.

In *Jesus Man of Prayer* the author, Margaret Magdalen, says that the darkness of God is not the absence of light. She states that the light of God is so powerful that it is blinding. It is like looking directly at the sun that blinds you in its brightness. I like this idea. Nevertheless, I also like the image of a dark, tender God. A dark-skinned God with a big, tender heart. In trying to reconcile this with the verse saying, "God is light" I could see it having a double meaning, meaning also, "God is not heavy."

While I watched the night turn to day, I lay down on the floor and stretched out. A truly amazing thing happened then, a very physical feeling. It was as if I had had a gaping, oozing wound stretched from my heart area to my mind and that wound healed with an instantaneous suction feeling as the wound closed. That entire day was tremendous for me. My mind worked with a clarity that I had never known. My attention was extremely focused. That night as I lay down and thought about the day and the feelings and thoughts I tried to name what had happened besides experiencing a transformation. The word that came to mind was "integrated." On that day, I was "integrated." I lay in that strength and stretched my body over the earth from continent to continent, as I went to sleep.

I am finally finished with this story. That is probably good. For you see, today one of my sandals broke. I borrowed a friend's pair of thongs, but they broke too. I have had to go barefoot almost all day. Now I am looking. There's got to be a burning bush around here somewhere...

Consider the Sparrows

All along the way, I have caught glimpses of a spiritual path. Its light has shown on the stones in such a manner that the path has sometimes appeared one strewn with diamonds. Most of the time however, it has appeared only as gray stones on a path into the unknown. Some part of me knew that my path was the path of music ministry and storytelling. I have heard this path of God call to me all of my life. One day, God and I had a conversation for I was contemplating choosing to walk where I heard God calling. It was a hard decision to make because I did not want to disappoint all those people who had supported me as a pastor.

It was a beautiful day and I had been looking out over the balcony of my apartment and singing my heart out in order to ignore the calling of the path. In truth, it was only in aggravation that I began the conversation. The path called and my heart longed for its peace. I tried to listen to the peace but fear kept raising its awesome head. I thought about the cost of taking the path. I thought about how much I owed on my seminary debts. I wondered about how I would support myself when and if I took the path. Finally, in an act of desperation, I cried out, "But how will I live?"

This is the truth. No sooner had I spoken those words than I saw that twelve Chipping Sparrows had descended upon my balcony. I was literally dumbstruck as a portion of scripture came alive before my eyes:

"So have no fear of them for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet, not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Creator. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." Matthew 10:26-31

...Sometimes God takes forever to answer prayers. Sometimes God takes only a moment.

Parents

Summer came and went like “great balls o’ fire.” Jerry Lee Lewis couldn’t have played it any better. The months have flown like hours as the earth tilts toward another season. Fields are harvested; their golden colors paint a perfect picture of nostalgia. Colored leaves fall and dance to the ground, the air is crisp with November. I find it hard to believe I am back in the small rural town of my youth. It has been a difficult adjustment. After living in a major city for four years, I find there is some comfort in the city for one who is so different. At least there, it is easier for a lesbian to get lost... or found. Here, where everyone is a “family” I am conspicuous to say the least. Here, where the KKK meets down the road, I feel in danger. Here, where women have big hair and long, painted fingernails, I am a raw, sore thumb of ordinary. For now it is where I live, I cannot say that it is home.

As I search of a job and learn about waiting on God, I find that God has an unusual sense of humor. I must be more careful about that for which I pray. Not long ago I prayed for the opportunity to know my parents as people. I live at my parents’ house after many years away from them. The move made sense financially and it appeared that was the direction of God’s leading. The experience has not been fun...however, it’s not been all bad either. In fact, I believe it has been an answer to many prayers.

Parents are unusual children. Somewhere they met, fell in love, possibly got married and had children. No one ever remembers to give parents a manual on accepting a child and for that matter; no one gives a child a manual on what it means to accept parents. As I have returned to my parents’ house, I realize that just as my parents did not know how to be parents I did not know how to be their child. It has also become evident that we have loved each other, but could never hear that love above our individual pain. This struggle has not been one of sexuality, but a struggle of three children, my mother, my father and me. Somewhere they missed something they needed and they passed that need on to me. Is that need one for God or is it for each other? Perhaps it is a little of both.

“For this reason I bow my knees before God, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of God’s glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God’s Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” Ephesians 3:14-18

Driving in the Night

Melancholy Baby hums through my veins, but it is not a tune. It is a feeling. A smoky haze colors the beat of my heart. The blues seep into my being and sing a lonesome song into the dark of the night. “Won’t you be with me tonight? I don’t want to be alone. Don’t want your lovin’ or squeezin’, just want you to hold me tight.”

Alone, so alone. Where are you God? As I wait for a response, I hear nothing but the traffic roar by and the sound of my engine as I write. The rattle of my car door, but nothing more. Yet, even as I wait in the seeming silence of God, I know that I am not alone. Somehow, God is very near, if only in my breathing, if only in my prayers.

“The Word of the Lord came to Elijah saying, ‘...go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to Elijah...”

God Feigning Sleep

You've given yourself away,
for I saw you snicker.
I spoke aloud and said, "God is asleep."
I waited for you and you took no action.
Then as I saw you lying there, I remembered
the words of the Psalmist,
"the Lord neither slumbers nor sleeps."
That's when I saw you snicker.
Now I know that you, the mischievous, loving God,
you are feigning sleep.
You are waiting on me to act.
In your playful, waiting silence,
you are asking me,
How much do I want to serve you?
How much do I love you?
What price will I pay in order that I might awaken you?

Independence Day

This is not what you think it is. This is not a reflection on the joys of being American. However, since we are close to the day where our nation celebrates its freedom from tyrannical rule, I find myself reflecting on the independence of the Christian believer. Each Sunday we celebrate Independence Day. Our rites and scriptures are celebrations that we have been set free through the work of God in Christ Jesus. We have been set free from the tyrannical rule of death and evil. We have been set free to live extraordinary lives of love and justice so that all people and indeed, all of creation will know that life is good and that God is love. In celebrating our Eucharist, we believe that through the body and blood of our Lord we are empowered to live lives that embody love and acceptance. Now here is the hard part. To embrace and embody lives of freedom also means a willingness to embrace sacrifice; the price that Jesus paid for our freedom was his own life on a cross. What price is it that we must pay?

Strange question isn't it when we're talking about freedom? Yet, it must be asked because with this gift of freedom comes another gift called "free-will." While we are set free from the bondage of sin, we are also given this gift called free will so that we can just as easily choose to live lives that are full of bitterness and enmity. We are just as free to abuse our creation, as we are to treat our creation with care and concern. We are just as free to ignore the homeless, as we are to feed them. We are just as free to hold grudges against our neighbor, as we are to forgive them, to shun those who are different from us as we are to embrace diversity.

Jesus says, "*...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*" (John 8:32). This is the dilemma faced in our freedom. What is the truth? How much of my comfortable life am I willing to sacrifice for my freedom from worry or the freedom of another from oppression? Am I willing to sacrifice another's view of me in order to reach out to the outcast? Am I willing to be the one who is a voice of justice for those who have no voice? Am I willing to live my life as though it is true that God really loves me in spite of what my upbringing has told me?

The freedom that we celebrate in our worship is the freedom that each person has value in the eyes of God. The freedom that we embrace in our scriptures is that God saves "*humans and animals alike*" (Psalm 36:6b) and therefore exhorts us to care for each other and practice stewardship of our earth. The freedom that

we celebrate in the Eucharist is that the omnipotent God seeks to become a part of us so that all people may know the joy of true freedom. Now here is the other part of the story. God is hoping that the world learns of freedom, love and justice through YOU.

The Problem with Being a Woman

After graduation at seminary, I found myself excited about the new adventure and the potential to live my dream of being a pastor. All the years of praying and studying were going to amount to something, make a difference. Throughout seminary I had heard all the stories of the problems of women finding pastoral positions. At the time, women's ordination [\[10\]](#) was only twenty-five years in the making. Since my internship had gone so well I felt confident that perhaps it would not take me so long. Being assigned to the North

Carolina Synod [\[11\]](#) meant of course I was going to get to stay in the south, be near family and hopefully be assigned to a small church willing to take a risk on a woman. Of course, time proved that Southerners could take as long as they wanted about anything, especially about a woman in ministry.

The Synod Office at the time was gracious and gave me plenty of opportunities to preach at churches where the pastor was on vacation or out sick. I could always tell when I was the first woman to preach at a congregation. The first reception was formal and respectful, but not warm or excited. There was oftentimes a disgruntled parishioner or organist who would flat out tell me that they did not believe that women should be in ministry. I listened and prayed that I could at least be a word of difference. Afterwards at those churches, it was interesting to see the surprise on the same people's faces. They were pleased to see that a woman could preach and lead worship. In many instances I was invited back.

Months went by before I had a first interview with a small congregation. The interview went well and we all had great rapport. The following Sunday when I went to preach as the second part of the interview, everyone was supportive and loving. Meeting again with the call committee (a group of people gathered to search for a church's new pastor), they were glowing and positive. It felt like I had a chance to have my first church. A week later I received a letter saying thanks but no thanks. I was disappointed of course. A month or two later someone who had a contact on the call committee had discovered the only reason I didn't get the position. He said I was the strongest candidate and the best preacher, but I was a woman. I tried not to become discouraged but as the months crept by, it was hard to know when or if I would have a chance to serve as a pastor.

During this time I worked at Cokesbury Bookstore in Charlotte, NC. The

exposure at Cokesbury empowered me to make connections with pastors in the Charlotte area as well as the ability to keep up on my reading, research and Bible study. Some of the pastors and Christian Educators I met and reconnected with at Cokesbury became great resources and bastions of hope as I waited for a call. It was at Cokesbury that I first met the man I would later work with when I was ordained as a pastor, though at the time, I did not know him and of course, he did not know me. Somewhere in his visits and visits of other Lutheran Pastors to the bookstore, I discovered that Advent Lutheran Church was looking to bring in a new co-pastor. I called the bishop and asked for my name to be submitted for their review.

While I waited to interview somewhere, I assisted at St. Luke's Lutheran Church for a time. I also applied to preach at my hometown Lutheran Church and began playing guitar for the Taize Service at St. Peter's Episcopal Church downtown. After six months of waiting and praying I began to wonder if I would need to change Synods, that maybe the South, or at least the NC Synod, was not ready for one more woman preacher. All of my friends from seminary who were woman were getting appointments and being ordained. It looked as if I would be the last one to be ordained. Imagine then my joy when I received the call that Advent Lutheran Church wanted to interview me.

The interview went well and the pastor and I clicked, it seemed. We had similar visions for the life of worship, education and Bible Study and we both thought that the life of prayer was integral to living a fulfilling and spiritual life. The sanctuary was modern, painted in dark green with the altar and lectern being carved out of oak. Hanging above the altar was a hand-carved Christ ascending off of the cross into the world with stars surrounding the earth. The image was both one of ascension but also bread of life as the world was brown like a wafer of bread.

The pastor explained the poignant history behind the carvings. The carver had died while completing his work and his sons came to the church and hand carved their father's casket in that sanctuary. The room was heavy with prayer, hope and light.

I begged God for the second interview. The first interview was to see if the senior pastor and I could see eye-to-eye. I was high as a kite when I got the call for the second interview to meet with the call committee. The next step was to meet and see if the congregation and I could envision ministry together. The call committee was delightful and as I left the interview my heart was so full of joy and light that it danced. The committee had said they would give me a call in a few days and let me know their decision.

One morning as I prepared for work I ironed and begged God, "Please God

let me have this call. I'll do anything you ask of me if I can work at Advent Lutheran Church." That afternoon I received a call that Advent would indeed like for me to be their first associate pastor and the chaplain for Lutheran Campus Ministries. The following Sunday the entire congregation took a vote and only two people voted against me (who later became most dear to me and apologized though I didn't know their names) because I was a woman. Still, the larger vote won and I was called to Advent. I was ecstatic.

Advent

The name, “Advent”, was more than the name of the church. Advent is also a season of the church year celebrated right before Christmas. Originally, the season of Advent was a season similar to Lent (time before Easter) that was focused on penitence and fasting. In more recent history the Advent season has become one of preparing and watching and waiting for the coming Christ. During this time, late November until December 25, churches who celebrate Advent will not sing Christmas songs in anticipation of the coming Christ. The meaning of this word was important to me and having it associated with my first call was sobering. God was preparing me for something.

I had assisted in communion many times in the years as a seminarian so the offer to assist at Advent was nothing new even though it was exciting. My ordination date was set for November 5, 1995 but I began working at Advent on October 5, 1995. Church protocol is such in the Lutheran church that a person may assist at communion (hand out the bread or wine to the people), but until being ordained by the church she could not preside (bless the bread, sing the prayers over the bread). Because I had assisted many times in the past years with communion, I could not be prepared for the awe that surrounded me as I gave communion to my first congregation.

Perhaps the oval shape of the communion area contributed to the experience, but I was also aware of the carved Christ watching over our table. As the people gathered round and the senior pastor and I were surrounded by the congregation waiting for the bread and the wine, all I could see, all I could feel were eyes. The eyes were not eyes of judgment but eyes that were waiting and watching for God. My world seemed to spin a bit as I began to follow behind the senior pastor giving the cup after the bread. As we moved around the table, the eyes of the people became the one eye of God looking at us, while we looked for God. God was watching and it was good and blessed.

In the month while awaiting my ordination I felt that I prepared for a wedding. The excitement at Advent and at my home church, St. John’s Lutheran in Concord soared. I received word that my beloved people from Tallahassee would not only send me a stole [\[12\]](#) for my ordination, but many would drive up to attend my ordination. My friends from the Taize Prayer service at St. Peter’s Episcopal rejoiced with me and volunteered to play recorders, guitars and lead the Taize music during the communion portion of my ordination. New friends I

had made in Charlotte and the Cokesbury co-workers were excited for me and praying. Some of the other pastors I had met at Cokesbury and the Presbyterian Campus Ministry staff promised to be at my big day. As the day arrived, I was beyond joy.

Before my ordination, others ordained before me all spoke about the moment they knew they were ordained, when they became priests. With each telling of their stories, they said the most important moment was when the other pastors and bishop laid hands upon the ordained. I was ready for that moment. When I kneeled and the other pastors and the bishop gathered round, I waited for that moment for the spirit to descend on me. All I felt were heavy hands pressing upon me and it felt that there was no spirit, no big moment. Suddenly, I questioned, *"What if I wasn't supposed to be a pastor?"* and in that moment, the presiding bishop reached down and pulled my hands up in offering to God. In that action, the same type of feeling as at my baptism raced from the bishop's hand into my own and down into the soul of me. Electric, tingling spirit moved me to tears, to hope, to service. I believed and I wanted to serve.

Ministry at Advent was exciting and busy. A growing church in a growing part of Charlotte, NC we had over five hundred families, a campus ministry, youth group and a wonderful justice oriented program working to help with Habitat for Humanity, feeding the homeless and seeking to create a program to empower positive integration of diverse people in both communities and churches (including gays and lesbians). I joined the Charlotte Clergy Association. We had healing services and Bible Studies. Life was busy, but beautiful and I loved all the people of Advent.

Worship is my favorite part of life. Always has been and always will be. That's just the way I am designed. My favorite definition of worship means "to bow down, kiss the hand" of God. As I prepared to preside at my first communion as an ordained pastor, I was nervous that I would say the wrong words or spill the wine. How many times had I heard the song called The Great Thanksgiving, but would I be able to remember where the pastor's part went and how to get back to the people's response? As I prepared the table for communion, I felt a great calm come over me. I have always felt that communion was a miracle even when I was a small Baptist child. As I began to chant the music it felt like heaven descended. As the people responded to the Great Thanksgiving I felt the light of the people go up to God. The miracle was bread and wine mixing the hearts of God and the people. I was humbled to be a part of that moment.

Ministry grew and blossomed that year. The people at Advent were (and still are) a loving, justice oriented people. At first the hardest part of my ministry was

to keep the youth and children from propping on my head or shoulders. Each Sunday I came home after church with a headache or neck ache because they all thought it funny that the new pastor was so short (most sixth graders and some fifth graders are taller than me). When I asked them to stop and explained, they of course were kind. Some of the parishioners had difficulty with my sermon or my way of handling matters but they would come talk to me and work it out. This was love to me. To work together for the good of all and in the name of God, this was what ministry was about to me. I fell deeply in love with the people of Advent. So much that I began to have difficulty saying no to whatever was asked of me. So when the music director resigned and I was asked to also lead the choir, I said yes. What else could I do? I loved them. I loved their worship and our ministry together. That summer the pastor took a sabbatical for three months. The congregation got behind me and we worked together to keep the church thriving while the senior pastor was away. The busy work and the schedule began to take its toll on me as the summer months moved in and asthma showed its ugly face again. I had insurance and doctors so I figured all would be well if only I could get through July and August.

Many people do not realize the time that a pastor spends on writing sermons, preparing Bible Studies, counseling people and going to meetings. As more meetings piled up while we searched for a new music director and the daily tasks of running the administrative part of a congregation began to pile up, it began to feel that my work was more of a business professional. As more meetings were required there seemed to be less time for counseling and spiritual direction. My health continued to give me a challenge, yet I felt that all would be well when the senior pastor returned and fall weather set in. When it was fall I would rest a bit and get well and get back to my contemplative prayer life. I had time because I was strong and still young at thirty-five. I had been in ministry less than a year; I just needed to catch my second wind. It would happen in September when the senior pastor returned.

The senior pastor did return and the load began to lighten, but my health continued to be a challenge so much the doctor said she was seeing me too much. I then sought out a pulmonary specialist in hopes that we could beat the asthma problem and keep me working at my life's calling. I loved being a pastor more than anything I have ever done. I wanted to spend as many years of my life being as pastor as I had dreamed of being a pastor. When I was younger, if I was not pretending to be a choir director I had my red Bible from the fourth grade on top of a toy box pretending to be a preacher. I had to get well because I loved ministry and I loved Advent.

On September 21, 1996, I received a call from Mary. Mary and Dave were

two of my dearest friends in seminary with Mary being like my sister and Dave a beloved brother. We had lost touch for a while due to the constraints of being busy with our different parishes. Both Mary and Dave were serving small Lutheran churches in Pennsylvania. Recently we had gotten back in touch to catch up on how ministry was going. Dave had told me he was preparing to go back to school to get his doctorate so he could teach and take better care of his diabetes. I had been waiting to hear when they would move back south, so when Mary called, I thought it was to give me a date for their move. Instead Mary told me that Dave had died that day of a diabetic coma. She had gone to her church only a moment, but while she was out, he had seized and died. She had lost her beautiful, ruddy husband and I had lost one of my dearest friends. Dave died at age thirty-six and my heart was broken in two.

As I look back on that time, it is clear that Dave's death became a turning point for me, a wake up call if you will. My health continued to decline and I felt still young, but his dying so young proved to me that nothing is forever. I returned to counseling to understand Dave's death and face my own immortality. I never wanted to live forever, but I did want to live much longer, have a longer ministry, pay off my seminary debt. My battle with health issues and my grief over Dave began to turn into depression. The depression led to more illness and fatigue. At first someone suggested that perhaps I should seek a smaller congregation. While that made sense to me, I loved Advent. I did not want to leave Advent. I wanted to be well.

Time

When I first left Advent it was to regain my health. My allergies and asthma had worsened to the point where even my doctor said I was at the office too much. Something was physically wrong and physical sickness always takes its toll on the spirit. In the spring of 1997, I gave my resignation to my church. I told them it was due to my health problems and it was my truth. Some of the people approached me asking if I had problems with my co-pastor and if that was why I was leaving.

I had only been at Advent (as a pastor/chaplain and managing choir director) for a year and a half. One brave and kind soul even asked if my resignation was due to my homosexuality and he offered to stand behind me and fight to remain as the pastor and be open. I was humbled and amazed by his offer. Due to the large congregation, the copious commitments with the choir and the needs of the chaplaincy, the job was more than I could handle and get well. I knew I could not also face coming out on top of the job.

After getting a job at a temporary agency, I began exercise and rest programs. I worked with homeopathic and natural healers. Life is scary when you can't breathe and that was my problem. I could rarely go a week without having an asthma attack. I like breathing. For some reason it's important to me. At least with a "regular" job, there were two days off and no evening calls. While I worked on my physical health, I also began to renew my practice of prayer and meditation and work with my spiritual director, Royce Ann.

Part of my new discernment was to delve into prayer and concentrate on where my path was leading me this time. I arranged with a retreat center in Kingstree, SC for a silent retreat of discernment. Royce Ann was a good Episcopal woman of prayer and understood the importance of silence and listening. She said she had a phrase she wanted me to consider, and this is the sentence I was to contemplate, "Who do you say that I am?"

Time had gotten the best of me and I could not imagine what she meant, so she explained that in my quiet time she wanted ME to ask God, "Who do YOU, God, say that I am?" I was excited both about the silent retreat and that I at least knew God would choose from these three vocations; musician, teacher or preacher. Those are the areas where I was trained so this was going to be quick and easy. Much to my chagrin, it was harder to come to quiet than I wanted and the time passed too quickly without a word. I kept pestering God, "Which one? I

need to get back with Royce Ann. I want to start this new life off right. Which one?"

We all forget that prayer is as much listening as it is talking and if we are honest with ourselves, prayer always works best when it's heavy on the listening. I was one hour away from the time to meet with Royce Ann and, as I sat on the back swing of my porch, resigned myself to the fact that I had no answer and when I met with Royce Ann I would have to tell her so. She wasn't a taskmaster and she would for sure encourage me to stick with the waiting. In that moment of resignation, my spirit whispered to me, "You're an artist." My response wasn't one of relief, but of disbelief. "What do you mean by that?" As a musician, I knew that music falls under the broad category of the arts, but how vague could God be when I needed answers? Royce Ann laughed when I told her and her sweet spirit helped me laugh too. My new daily prayer was to learn how to live out that calling of "artist." God had given me an answer but I didn't have a clue about its meaning.

During this time of discernment, I had continued to preach in the Piedmont area filling in as a supply pastor for congregations without a pastor. Due to my contacts through UNC-Charlotte and the clergy association of Charlotte, I was also able to lead some music and storytelling events around the same area. Spiritual direction opportunities opened up as I lead some women's retreats and taught some specialty classes. All this while I continued to pray for discernment on where God was leading me next. After a month away from parish ministry, I began to get a little more rest and my prayer deepened. During that deepening of prayer, God whispered again. This time the message was, "It's time."

When I left Advent I had no intention of coming out to anyone. I was not ready emotionally and I still had a tremendous seminary debt. I argued with God because I wasn't asking if it was time to come out to my bishop. I was asking for the next step in my artist journey...and see, that's how God works. Even as I type this I can see how coming out to my bishop was exactly THE NEXT STEP to being who God created me to be and that I could not be the artist God desired if I was not open about my life. In addition, being a leader and a model for integrity was important to me. I did not lie but I learned the hard way how much energy it takes to deceive. Let me tell you this story as an example.

In every church, there is a troublemaker. One Sunday our local troublemaker came up to me and said, "Robin, are you going to be at home this afternoon?"

I said, "Yes."

"Well, I'm going to call you. I have something I have to talk to you about." This same person had accused me of pandering to get a colleague hired over her son when I had barely been installed as a pastor. This same person daily checked

on my attire to see if I was dressing as a pastor should. I tried not to be concerned but I also talked to my partner about it. At the time, my partner had started going to Advent because she liked its atmosphere and acceptance. That same morning the woman had gone up to my partner and asked her, “Are you still living with Pastor Robin?” When my partner said yes, there was no more discussion, but as we talked about the conversations we both felt that I was going to be confronted about my sexuality (this was months before my resignation due to health reasons). I was worried because I did not want to lie at all and this woman was not known to be one to beat around the bush. If she were going to confront me, it would be a blatant, blunt question that would not leave room for illusion or escape.

From shortly after noon, until four hours, later I paced and worried and prayed. Was I ready to give up my job, my pastorate, my life calling, all in that afternoon? All in one phone call? I prayed for guidance and each time the phone rang my heart raced. After the hours of prayer and struggle, I trusted that God would guide me in any way needed to answer her questions with truth, dignity and love. The call finally came and I was ready for her. She asked the question that had loomed over the afternoon, “Robin, do you want a dog house?” We talked about how my dog needed a doghouse and how they would get to my house. Then I hung up exhausted over all the worry and preparation for a question that was never asked. My partner and I laughed in relief but it also showed me something very important. A lot of my creative energy was going into hiding my true identity.

All during my seminary career I knew the day would come when the time was right to be open about my sexuality. Of course, I had preconditions, after my ordination, after I was well, after I paid off my car, my house, my seminary loan. When I heard the spirit’s whisper, “It’s time,” I was not ready, but I knew it to be the truth. I wanted to be open. I wanted to be honest with God and everybody. I had done my counseling, hadn’t I? And I had worked with all of my spiritual directors to prepare for that decisive moment. The time was come.

This part of my story has been the hardest to write. Hard because after eleven years I still feel the anguish and pain of loss. When I came out to the bishop, I knew I also had to come out to my family. My church was too close to other family members and since I had been active in the clergy association of Charlotte, I also knew there was a chance of my journey ending up in the local papers. The day I mailed those letters was my first true act of faith; believing and acting in manners that God is love. How many times had I preached that God is love? Did God love everyone but me? I finally took a chance in believing. I thought I was prepared. The next day I couldn’t breathe and had to be taken to

the emergency room. I thought it was because of the anxiety but turns out my allergy to peanuts had worsened to one that caused anaphylactic reaction. Even as I write this, I am holding my breath so I know I was also holding my breath then. My fate was in the hands of the religious.

Funny how pain is a memory that can flood your soul and body at the oddest times. I have to say that most reactions were not as I had expected. The bishop did not immediately remove me and I feel even now it was because he had watched me through seminary and he had seemed a progressive guy. At the time, the ELCA was removing any homosexual pastor from the roster and the news quickly went into the church magazine, *The Lutheran*, so that all could see the great cleanup job the ELCA was doing to rid the church of our heresy. The synod, the governing group of the local church, seemed to want to keep things quiet. The bishop even allowed me to continue as a supply pastor in the Piedmont. My family wasn't happy with me at all, but they did not disown me as I had anticipated. Condemnation still hung in the air like the drooling wild thing it is, hungry for your flesh, anyone's flesh.

This point of the story is where my world, my mind, my heart and soul began to come undone. In my work with my counselors and my spiritual directors, we had worked on my acceptance of myself and that God loved me like others. I had prided myself on my ability to see that the church was not God so when the church started separating from my life, I thought it wouldn't hurt so much. What I never realized was that I loved the church. No, I did not love the institution's message of condemnation, its history of oppression or violence, but that is only one side of the two-faced church.

There is music and miracles too. Stories that will break your heart in two of real life people making a difference in the world, in a community, in a family. Flesh and blood realities that reach out, touch, love, and care. There is a world of art that both inspires and documents the darker side of the church. The church is both good and bad, just like the rest of our human institutions. Because I associated the love of God with the lighter side of the institution, I never thought about the fact that I would lose the good things too.

Pain distorts so many realities. I began to lose sight of my path as the days unfolded and the bishop kept in touch, but still guillotine ready with that monster of despair a watchdog. My partner was scared of what was going to happen and I didn't know how to console myself or help her. Somewhere in this period I crossed paths with an old acquaintance, Salli. She started coming by the house weeks before I was to leave Advent and so a couple of us would visit each others homes.

Later, my friends would tell me they could tell Salli was hitting on me, but

I've never been able to tell. As a church person, I always think people are just being nice (unless it's blatantly sexual). Salli began to call, ask for prayer and ask spiritual questions. In the past, Salli had been a regular fan at our softball games at where I played eleven years before working at Advent; so to me, she was a connection from the old softball team. She was a connection to my past that seemed good since she was connected to the softball team I loved. I trusted her because she knew friends that I trusted.

I discovered later that's how scam artists work. They tell you what you want/what you need to hear, but I didn't know it at the time. How could I? I was afraid and suddenly there was a strong personality telling me she would support me and help me fight the church. I needed someone to be strong. My world was falling apart. I was falling apart and while my health had improved, I was not better and the grief of loss aggravated my asthma. Every day was a battle. I wanted someone to fight with me. Salli told me how we were just alike, wounded but strong fighters. As you can see, I bought into Salli's lie and broke up with my partner in September, three months later.

During this time, someone had started a rumor at Advent that I left because of conflict with the senior pastor at the time. While we did sometimes have conflict between us, we usually worked it out. When people asked me directly, I reconfirmed that I left because of my health challenges. Rumors are a cancer of all institutions and when fed with just a hint of truth, they grow vicious. Since I was not at the church and only heard things later relayed to me, it becomes clear that someone had set out to hurt the senior pastor and since I was the one who left, they used my leaving as the tool to cause pain and conflict. I will not write his name because he is a good man, but all of us are human and as humans we have differences and sometimes misunderstand and make mistakes. The pastor called to confront me about the rumor so I agreed to meet with him and tell him about those who had asked if I left Advent because of our differences and that I let them know that was not why I had left the church. I thought it was also a good time to catch him up with the fact that I came out to the bishop and that I had broken up with my partner. I always want to be an honest person and it was so good to be able to speak the truth of my life in the name of God, in the light of day. I thought he would appreciate my giving him the news rather than hearing it through the synod office. Instead, he became angry that I had not talked to him while I was still a pastor, but I just couldn't. When I was a pastor, the only ones I felt I could trust were my gay/lesbian friends and my counselor. The witch-hunt for homosexuals was too prevalent. I was too afraid.

I made so many mistakes from this point on. I didn't know how to face the failure and loss then or write about it now. Others made mistakes too and

together we all made one big mess. Years after getting rid of Salli from my life, I realize that she was probably the instigator of the fires of dissention, hatred and lies. She was a smart thief, hard to catch because she always knew enough of the truth of a matter to cause you to doubt yourself or another. She told me she talked to the pastor and stood up for me. I was glad since I was so tired of fighting while battling my health. I tried keeping my house by myself after my ex moved out, but Charlotte was an expensive place and my temporary job did not pay that much. Soon Salli asked to move in and help with the bills. I was behind on my house payment and afraid of everything—everything but her and her “offer” to help. At the beginning of October, Salli moved in. Not long afterward, my bishop called for a meeting with me.

The bishop and I had been having meetings to talk about how we could work through the events of my coming out, if we could work through things. One night, a Wednesday, he called for my resignation from the ELCA by Friday or I would be charged with sexual misconduct with a member of my church. He also stated that due to my preaching in the Piedmont, too many people were asking to interview me to be a pastor. Anyone who had read the newspapers then, and even now, would know that this was coming. I knew it was coming, but because I had been given three months to preach in the area, I began to hope there was a place for me in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. There wasn't.

The bishop was never quite clear or I was so confused by my emotions that I didn't understand, but it appears that the charges would have been brought against me because my former partner had decided to join the church after I had started to preach there. For a heterosexual couple, this would not have been a problem ever. In fact, I was surprised at how many church people shared indiscretions of their white male pastors having multiple affairs and still maintaining a working relationship with the ELCA. I wanted to scream at them to shut up, but I don't scream or say “shut up” so I just listened knowing they tried to give examples of why they felt this act against me was so unjust.

My decision to get involved with Salli became clearly a mistake I could not reconcile. As I left the bishop, wanting to fight the institution, it was clear that when I broke up with my former partner, I should have stayed single. Had I stayed single, I could have fought somehow.

In that realization, I was heavy with condemnation. Not from the church, but from myself. When Salli moved in, the support system I had counted on in my friends also left me because of how I done wrong by my ex. Many times before Salli had come into my life I had wondered if I was in the right place, the right relationship. I had too many questions and was struggling so hard with my call. While my ex and I attempted counseling, I knew the relationship was over for

me, something was wrong, but I did not have the courage to speak the truth to my ex or to my dear friends. I was so lost. If breaking up with my ex was not bad enough, to make matters worse, I got involved with someone else while my world fell apart. Any idiot knew better than to do that, right? All of my pastoral training told me not to get involved with anyone, just get my own life on track first. Like so many humans, I followed the leading of my fear and was swallowed by my loss. I regret this to this day.

The Resignation

Resigning seems so simple a word and so often in my jobs a resignation meant moving on to a better place, but this was different. For me it felt like I was typing out my own death warrant. Church was my life and had been my life always and in all ways. Not only had I been religious most of my life, but also church was where I made my friends. The enormity of what the bishop asked me to do was incomprehensible to me. Was I betraying myself, God, all homosexuals? Because of my involvement with Salli, I knew I could not fight as I had anticipated. I had to resign. I was forced by the bishop and forced by my own mistakes to resign as a pastor from the ELCA. I wish I still had a copy of my letter to share with you but I don't. It was too painful. I do remember ending with this statement because it resonates with me now in my beliefs on how the church views homosexuals, "If you don't want homosexuals to become pastors then you need to tell the Holy Spirit to leave us alone."

You might notice it's not working. The Holy Spirit continues to call men and women to the ministry regardless of the church's stance. Of course, my letter had no effect on anybody in the church. The following week I would receive a letter from the bishop informing me that I was no longer to preach, teach or wear any of my vestments and I was not to be in contact ever with Advent Lutheran Church. I was defrocked, but my heart still loved God. No matter what happened or what they wrote, the one thing the church could never take away from me was my ordination. That moment was God's gift to me and nothing could take that from me. That moment belonged to me from God and the bishop could not touch that moment in time, take it back or tell me not to wear it. That gift I still carry in my heart and sing in my soul.

While the bishop's assistant was busy typing out a letter removing me from the ELCA's list of rostered pastors, the pastor I had worked with decided I needed to come and stand before the congregation at Advent. At the time, I felt he was doing the Ricky Ricardo demand of "...you got some 'xplainin' to do." I argued with him that I could not do that. I had just tendered my resignation to the ELCA and I was in no state of mind even to have that conversation with him. My life was falling apart faster than lightning strikes. He pressed and pressed me to stand before the congregation and let them ask any questions of my life. I told him no, no, no. I couldn't do it. I was in too much pain. When he continued to press, I told him, "I have said no and I can no longer talk to you. I am going to

hang up.” He pressed some more and I hung up. Five minutes later he called back to say since I would not appear before the congregation and accept blame for what I had done he was going to send out a letter to the congregation. I said, “Fine, leave me alone.” He called again on that same day and read some letter to me that I could only half listen to because I was so distraught and in pain. I could not listen or hear his words. My life was disintegrating before my eyes. The following Sunday, a dear church member (the same person who had called to tell me I was hired at Advent) called to ask me if I was sure that I wanted that letter sent out. I told her I just could not handle anything else, they needed to do what they had to and that I loved them. When I got the letter in hard copy, I wished I had asked for a draft first, but it felt at the time that pastor was going to do what he wanted no matter what I said. I was the homosexual so of course, I was the one in the wrong.

The letter stirred up controversy and hurt within the church. For me the letter appeared to be an attempt to show me as the wicked woman set out to deceive the good people at Advent. Several other people were hurt by the letter’s approach (they wrote me letters and called apologizing) and contacted the synod office for an assistant to come and moderate the conflict going on at the church. The synod made sure to contact me and remind me I was to have NO CONTACT with Advent or any of its members. I was a pariah after all. Someone in the Advent congregation shared it with the new church in North Charlotte and the wildfire was ablaze. I was so glad I had come out to my family even if they were not.

Charlotte presents itself as a big city and in many ways, it is, but in 1997, it was amazing how the small town mentality prevailed and the power of gossip reared its ugly head poisoning everything it touched. The mass mailed letter caused a backlash the pastor had not anticipated and barely a week after the first letter another followed stating that the first was for congregation members only and not to be shared with other congregations. It appears the other congregation wanted to use this as a study example.

Looking back, it is a miracle that this never hit the papers in one way or another. Thank goodness it didn’t, because the truth was so distorted that I doubt any of us involved really know all that happened. Fear is a deadly taskmaster and it was having a hey day with us. The assistant to the bishop was called to moderate the trouble at Advent. She also came to talk to me and keep in touch about where I was. She was kind and pastoral and as a former counselor had skills of listening that I needed at the time.

It soon became clear that her message was, “repent.” I confessed to her that I saw mistakes in how I made some wrong decisions AFTER leaving Advent (four

months after to be exact) and I thought that was what she was alluding to all along. Instead her message (whether intended or not) was for me to repent of who I was, a lesbian who loved God. She knew I loved God and wished to serve, but it was clear she wanted me to “get over” the lesbian part. I told her I disagreed with her, that God loved me too and we never spoke again after that.

During that first month, there was a flurry of activity as supportive church members from Tallahassee wrote the synod in support of me. I still keep the letters that the members of St. Stephen’s wrote to my North Carolina bishop and later copied to me. I still have the notes and cards from the kind people at Advent. There were no calls, no contact from my friends from seminary after I told them that I came out to my bishop. While I knew that as pastors they were too busy to call me, it also hurt, for only a pastor knows all that a pastor loses. To be a pastor is not a job but a calling. Yes, the long hours and demands feel like a job, but there is deep spirit guiding it all. The pastor moves not just among the ordinary workaday life of humanity but is also present at births, deaths, emotional struggles, illness and celebration. The joy of it all fills my heart with light as I type these words and to preside at communion is not only an honor but also a miracle. Years later in hearing Whitney Houston sing “Give me one moment in time, when I’m more than I thought I could be...” the vision, the memory that floated to my mind’s eye was lifting up the cup and the bread in worship at Advent. No other moment in my life mattered more.

Writing Home

Writing to a place I don't know, feeling heaven rise in my center. Lost in the madness of pleasing others I stop to pause for the silences that come like slow hiccups and my thoughts wait for the reaction. Somewhere in here there's me and somewhere in me there's God who neither slumbers nor sleeps but waits like a giant. Where are you God? Thank you as you rattle the chains of my heart and say "let them go. They're old. They'll fall off easily."

I've only known slavery not the tasty fresh savor of freedom.

My mouth waters from freedom hunger.

Freedom, freedom, someone's paid the dues and
it's not me. Hallelujah!

I'm tired of paying dues to clubs I didn't want to join.

Society at large is a big "social club"

and that's the joke because the social club of society
beats you till you're worn and forget that you knew life ever
before.

Still, there's something within you yelling, screaming, shouting that there's something more than being chained to the cold hard ideals of society.

The club falls again and you count the worth of the fight. Tired of the beatings do you give up or die? Something within cries out with persistent singing, "live, live, live." Your mind races like gazelles and the freedom of their movement fills your arms with the strength to ward off a blow. Somewhere a choice is to be made to stay and die or to walk away, crawl away, run away... anything that will get you back to where you came from—home.

Touch Me Jesus

Touch me Jesus. Just once, touch me with your hand. Reach into my wounded soul and touch that place that hurts for your human kindness. Put your hand into the wound of my soul and see that I am only human and not God. I will not ascend after these wounds. I will just exist on this planet and hurt.

Touch me Jesus. Just once hold me in your arms. Reach out and hold this child who reaches for you, my mother God. Caress my hair and tell me everything is going to get better, for I am vulnerable and small. I am not God and no angels will fly to my rescue. I await your protection and deliverance.

Touch me Jesus. Become the embodied God that you are. Love me with unconditional love that gives crumbs to dogs and hope to the hopeless. I am a beggar, hungry for your love, starving for your touch, dying to know that you are real.

I am a thief dying on the cross beside of you, convicted and dying but grasping for hope. Touch me Jesus. Just once, touch me.

Help My Unbelief

How many times I have prayed this prayer of Thomas. Yearning to understand have faith believe live in love; Striving to see God in the hum drum In suffering In happiness In people Lord, Help my unbelief.

People make it hardest. Confused by their own unbelief life is hard. We really know nothing but we grasp and try to create our existence with an order that makes sense when nothing makes sense when you want it to... when you need it to...

“Lord help my unbelief.” A cry of the yearning spirit seeking to break free from constraints of societal and social mores while at the same time wanting a sense of belonging a sense of place in this world.

...help my unbelief. I have cried that prayer in desolation begged God for revelation and often felt the silence of God

heavy like darkness.
Yet in that silent waiting,
beyond the moon and the stars
some part of my prayer
echoes in the heart of God
and the echo resounds back to me.

Coming Undone

The first mistake was getting involved with Salli. The second was not recognizing the early symptoms of abuse. After tendering my resignation to the church, my life began to deteriorate even further. Salli began to control my contact with friends. Then she began to limit my contact with my family. My family was hurt any way and so it was easy to buy into her reasoning not to go visit or reach out to them. I couldn't go see my family without taking her and her daughter along.

Rather than pay my bills, I would give her money when she asked for it. She not only got it from me, but some of the members of Holy Trinity. The madness of it all, how could I not see the lies? Years later and I still cannot unravel the lies and stories she told me.

Somehow, the money borrowed from the church members was returned. Mostly out of my paycheck. I could not face them. They had trusted Salli because they had trusted me. When one woman came to my office to get the money she told me bluntly, "Robin, she is using you and lying to you. Something is wrong. You need to get out of this relationship." I knew she was right but I was so afraid on so many levels. I could not see straight. I could not think clearly. I didn't know who to turn to, who I could trust or who I was any more. Nothing made sense.

The isolation then became verbal abuse. In the process of demeaning me, she continued to dwell on the wrongs the senior pastor had committed towards me and towards her. Again, she peppered her lies with portions of truths. I could not tell which was wrong. Every person that I trusted and wanted to reach out to for friendship or consolation, she told me what they were doing wrong and how they did not care for me. Isolation was the ticket to her plan.

I made the mistake of innocently asking her what made her happy. I wanted to find something in life to share with her, to give her happiness and joy. She screamed and cursed at me so that I tried getting out of the car. I was sure she was going to hit me. She then forced me back into the car cursing at me for the rotten life she had with her mother and how mean her family was to her. I knew that if only I could find a way to be kind, she could feel love from me. I was wrong.

The lies continued. It became worse after she went through a long illness. When she was in pain, she was meaner. She cursed me out for following the

doctor's instructions to assist her. I became so tense, that my jaws literally locked, not from tetanus, but from the stress of grinding my teeth together.

The pain in my jaws became so bad and clenched that I could not open my mouth to eat or even get a straw in my mouth. I found a massage therapist and set up the appointment. Salli was suspicious that I was cheating on her. She followed my every move. I had to have every meal, even lunch with her and she called me several times a day.

She went with me to the session but could not stay in the room. After all, the massage therapist was only going to work on the inside of my jaws. I left my clothes on while this occurred. The therapist talked to me through it all asking questions about the negativity I was allowing in my life. She was only a block away and knew me, talked to me before Salli moved in. She knew something was amiss. She knew I had lost my pastorate. Somewhere in the conversation she talked about releasing everything negative in my life in order to heal. The first thought that came to my mind—I wished I could release Salli and her daughter. Those two were the most negative thing in my life. Because Salli was so outrageous to me, her daughter did the same.

When I stood up to the kid, the child became worse and Salli allowed her actions. There was so much anger, hurt and yelling. Salli acted like she was standing behind me at times since I had to take her daughter to school, the special school Salli wanted me to drive an hour to in the morning. Somewhere in that time I wrote about this in my journal. While I was at work, Salli read my journal and then cursed me out for writing about my stress, my fears, my doubts and their negative ways. She did this by hitting on the wall. At that time I wondered how long it would be before she was going to hit me.

While Salli was out of work from the illness, she became mooney and talked about how she wanted to be worthy of my hard work. She was an active person who was always working in the yard or building something. She began to talk about a loss of self-esteem and since I had just lost my pastorate, I understood that. She asked if she could take care of the money. In all of my life, I had never had the same account with my partner. We had always found ways to split the bills and had separate accounts. Salli convinced me to get a bank account at her bank so I could meet her there and cash my check and she could handle the bills while I was at work. Yes, I was leery, but in my life I had been around honest people. As she began to hoard the bills, my mail and take over the financial situation she became more cheery. I thought I was helping her.

She began to talk to me about selling the house. I did not want to sell my house and did not want to move. The last thing I needed was another change. She continued to talk about moving to Salisbury, to any other town. I did not

want to move. I loved my house, my neighborhood and the people down the street.

One day, she sat me down on the couch after I came home from work saying she had to talk to me about something serious. By this time, I knew it could be anything, still I was shocked when she handed me a letter from my mortgage company stating I had three days to pay three months worth of back payments or I would face foreclosure. I ranted and raved about how this had happened. I had made the money and given her the checks or the cash to pay the bills. Where did the money go? I couldn't believe it. She never said what happened to it either. She only told me she had found a company who could help and we had an appointment that night. She acted like she had solved the problem, when she was the one who caused it, along with my own stupidity of course.

The summary is that there is no easy way to recover from such financial damage. There are scam artists who scam the needy, the poor, the elderly, the desolate and other scammers. The office we went to seemed official and for \$600.00 they could save my house. I paid the \$600.00 only to receive a letter from them that the mortgage company would not deal with them. In addition to losing another \$600.00, I was about to lose my house. Salli had acted all concerned as I took the day off to try and resolve this, save my house. She said she was going to go see a friend to see if she could find help. I was freaking out. As soon as she went out the door, I called a trusted friend from Columbia, SC and talked to her about what had happened. My friend encouraged me to check out everything else too and to get that woman out of my house. How? How was I going to get that woman out of my house I asked? My friend had no answer only that it had to be done. Of course, I knew that but I was lost and numb. After hanging up from the conversation with my friend, the phone rang again. It was the car finance company calling to tell me they were going to repossess my car if I did not pay the three months car payments that were past due. Again, these were bills I had assumed, had been promised were paid. I had trusted the wrong person when I should have known better. I hung up and wept and was still weeping when Salli came back with no news, no help of course and still no answer to what happened to all that money I had worked so hard to earn.

I cannot remember who helped me find a bankruptcy lawyer. I know I tried not to tell anyone else a thing. I was so humiliated and wanted no one to know how crazy my life had become or how desolate and alone I felt. I spoke briefly with the lawyer about what had happened. He asked if I wanted to file charges. I said I did, but I was afraid. I just wanted to save my house and my car. By November I had filed bankruptcy in order to save my house and my car.

At that time I sought help from a professional counselor. Salli fought me

every step of the way. I did not want to tell her to leave till I had a support system in place. Due to how she had isolated me from family and friends I had no support. Due to the lies she had told others at church, they no longer had reason to trust me or help me or believe that I would get out of the situation. Things finally got so bad that I didn't care if I died or what people thought. I only wanted Salli gone. I began counseling.

After getting the counselor in place and reconnecting with trustworthy friends who saw I was getting the help I needed, I told Salli to leave. She gave me excuses. I told her to leave by my birthday. I wanted her gone from my world. She began to tell lies to my neighbors about why I was throwing her out. A couple of days before she was to move out she came to me to tell me she had been diagnosed with brain cancer and she didn't know how she would make it. I told her, "I'm sorry this has happened, but you still have to go." Finally, I knew she was lying, though there was still a part of me that asked, "But what if she's not?" She moved out.

A day or two later, Salli came by again. No longer repentant, still talking about her recent diagnosis of cancer, she pulls out a gun. Nonchalantly she began playing with the gun and pointed it at me like she was looking at the gun. My dad had always taught my sister how to handle guns and he would never even allow us to point a toy gun at a living creature. I knew she was threatening me. I asked her if the gun was registered and why she needed it. She said the gun was not registered and she just wanted to make sure she was safe in her new neighborhood since there had been break-ins recently. She alluded to my keeping quiet though there was nothing specific she asked about. I did not know what she did with my money or hers. I did not know where she went during the day. I only prayed to be delivered from her. It took a while, but God answered my prayers and she moved farther away. Not long afterwards my neighbors began to come around and apologize for believing her about my wrongs. She had tried to scam them out of money too. My neighbor right next door said, "Robin, I don't believe or trust anybody, but I believed her. She was good. She knew how to lie. I've never seen such a good scam artist." It was the first time I had really thought of Salli that way, and I knew my neighbor tagged her right.

To Rebuild A Reputation

When I first set out to leave Salli the counselor's advice was, "Get out of this relationship and begin to rebuild your reputation." While I knew that he was speaking the truth, it seemed that he hardly knew me well enough at our first meeting to speak so directly to me and in such a harsh and commanding manner. Of course, it was the first time I had attempted working with a male counselor, so it could merely have been an approach that I was unaccustomed to at the time. While I did get out of the abusive relationship with Salli I also changed counselors. I needed someone gentler after suffering through years of harshness.

Today, years after his exhortation, I hear his words again about rebuilding my reputation. I harbor no ill feelings towards him for this. I understood then as I do now that he was concerned for my well-being. I was concerned too at the time. Still am concerned for my well-being and what was seen as my reputation. I am merely beginning to question what the word reputation means to me at this point now.

To rebuild my reputation means of course that at one time I had one. What was my reputation? I was a pastor who was defrocked because of coming out as a lesbian. In the eyes of the church, there is no way that I can rebuild my reputation. Although I served as a pastor, music director and youth director, none of that counted once I came out about my orientation. Once I became honest with the church about my identity, I no longer had a decent reputation, because I am a homosexual.

All of my work, all of my love, all of my sermons became invalid in the eyes of the church. That is unless I repent of my choice to be in a relationship with another woman. Since I am not called to the life of a monastic, the celibacy part at least, how can I rebuild my reputation in light of the church's stance?

Perhaps the counselor was talking about how my abuser ruined my credit. Thanks to a lawyer and the trusty Chapter 13 laws, I am now working to rebuild that reputation as someone who pays her bills on time. No one in the financial world cares that I trusted the wrong person, but those institutions are making ways for me to recover from tragedy. Within ten years, this will be removed from record and if everything goes as planned, my financial credibility, my financial reputation will be returned to me. The banks are working with me and it appears it is easier to rebuild my reputation in the secular world than in the sacred world. Or is it?

What does it mean to have a reputation in the sacred world? Is it to be approved by the one "holy, catholic and apostolic church?" Or is it to be faithful to loving God and loving your neighbor? What kind of reputation did I have in this sense? I did not quit loving God during this time. In fact, God was the only friend I had during the time of my abuse. It was through God, and through God using my neighbors (different angels at different times) that I was empowered to extricate myself from the sick relationship.

During this time, I wrote my friends and kept in contact as best as I could. Most did not like what they saw so they did not keep in touch. Now, as I seek to rebuild my relationship with my neighbors and friends, some have chosen to hold against me the fact that I made a mistake. What is my responsibility in this? I find that I do not like to take responsibility for my mistakes, but who does? To accept one's mistakes and make a change in life is a challenge to anyone, and yet, I've always wanted to be different. I've tried to be forthright and honest about my mistakes when I realize that they are indeed mine. What then, when you have not understood your own mistakes?

This has led me to the false conclusion that I accept my mistakes for what they are. However, I am just as human as everyone else is. It is easier to blame others than to take responsibility for my own mistakes. Part of what I want to be my reputation is that I want to be seen as someone who accepts responsibility for my own life. This life is my own. God is not going to hold my friends, my church, my neighbors, my family or my partner accountable for my life. My life is my responsibility.

The struggle is an age-old one between trying to find a balance between gospel and law. In Lutheran terms, the gospel is the good news about ourselves and how God has loved and redeemed us and the law being about all the ways that we fall short. How do we balance those two? In a world that wants to make it seem like perfection is an obtainable goal, how can we accept the inherent fallibility of our humanity? What does it mean to have a reputation as a human being? What does it mean to have a reputation as one who would follow a particular spiritual path?

As I think about my reputation, I would hope that it would have been that I was loving, kind to people and a lover of God. How could my honesty with the church have caused my reputation to be harmed? How could my having made a mistake in the choice of partner, caused me to not be loving and kind to my neighbor? There is some lesson that I am not getting at this point. I know that part of it is my anger; my anger that people did not see that I loved them. I told them but they didn't believe me. I admitted my mistakes when I could and apologized, but that doesn't make things right or forgotten. As I write that, I

realize that I am no different from them. In all of the years, I have had people to love me. I have not been able to believe that others could love me.

Why do I have a glimpse of this love now? Is it because I feel loved by the one I'm dating or is it the fact that in the face of grave danger to my spirit, soul, mind and physical life, I chose myself? In an abusive relationship, I finally chose to be kind to myself rather than endure any more abuse. In a relationship where I feared for my life, I decided that it was better to die trying to escape the abuse rather than to endure it any longer.

Now I see something I've been catching glimpses of for the past few weeks. Something that seemed strong, but that I have not understood. I lost my reputation. What reputation have I lost? I no longer have the reputation of being a religious sycophant. I no longer have the reputation of being at everyone's disposal for him or her to wipe his or her feet on as a doormat. I no longer have the reputation for allowing others to make decisions about my life. The reality is that no one likes it either. They want me back as I was. They want me back in the role I played. I still love them. I still love God, but I no longer want to play the part of the scapegoat. I have lost that reputation and I have to say that I don't want it back.

Good Will Hunting

Sometimes it is good to hurt. Never thought I would say that, but after last night, I realized that sometimes it is good to hurt. What happened last night? At an Education for Ministry (EFM) class, we watched a movie called "The Mission." [\[13\]](#) The goal was to reflect on the movie theologically for our next class discussion. In order to understand what I mean by good hurt, I must tell you the content of the movie and my reaction to it.

The setting is 18th century Brazil and Paraguay. A Jesuit priest, Gabriel (played by Jeremy Irons), takes himself to the top of a waterfall to build a mission with the Guarani Indians who have just killed the last priest who worked there. While out with the Indians they come across Rodrigo, a slave trader who catches the Indians and sells them to the Spanish. He had just captured a net full of Indians for slaves. Gabriel exhorts him to live differently and to stop the killing and enslaving the Indians. Of course, Rodrigo scoffs at the priest. The mercenary and slave trader return to the town with his catch of the day to find out his brother and Rodrigo's lover have fallen in love. He finds them in each other's arms and in a fit of rage kills his beloved brother.

Gabriel and the mercenary cross paths again because Rodrigo cannot recover from the guilt of killing his brother. The priest calls Rodrigo to penitence, stating that God can offer redemption. Rodrigo is skeptical, but both the priest and the mercenary begin working on his redemption. The priest takes Rodrigo with him back to the mission over the waterfalls. As part of the burden of guilt, Rodrigo drags a net filled with armor and swords. The weight of the net is quite a burden as he seeks to follow the priest and his brothers to the mission. This burden weighs heavily upon him as he tries to climb the steep cliffs that lead to the place over the water.

The other priests of the mission speak out that they feel that Rodrigo's burden is much too heavy for the journey. Gabriel agrees that it is much too heavy for the trip they are taking. They argue the community feels that Rodrigo has carried this burden long enough and that he should be released from it. Gabriel says while pointing at the mercenary, "He does not feel that he has carried the burden long enough and therefore neither do I. Only God will know when it is time for the burden to be released." The brother, a subordinate to Gabriel, protests again and the priest states, "This is an order, not a democracy."

Later, while climbing the steep cliff Rodrigo stumbles and is pulled down the

muddy slopes repeatedly, always struggling to move forward. The brother, in a fit of anguish, slashes the rope to release Rodrigo from his burden. The mercenary promptly retrieves the bag, bears the weight up tying his burden upon his back again. His grief and remorse is his own and belongs to no one else. Rodrigo takes responsibility for it.

The travelers finally arrive at the destination over the falls with the Indians who have come to love and care for the priests. As they wait for Rodrigo, it is clear that the Indians do not know whom they are waiting for there on the mountaintop. As Rodrigo and his heavy burden come over the last cliff, he falls on his face into the dirt. One of the Indians rushes to him in a moment of recognition that he was the slave trader who had captured some of the others. The Indian pulls Rodrigo's head back, places a knife to his throat as if to kill him.

The priests stand and watch with the rest of the Indians as with a swift movement the Indian chooses to cut off Rodrigo's burden rather than slash his throat. The armor and swords are quickly pushed off the cliff by the Indian as Rodrigo experiences a taste of pure mercy. After this, the movie shows the change of Rodrigo as he moves from being a selfish mercenary/slave trader into being a servant of God in love. I guess we could call this Part I of the movie, the setup of the characters.

The movie addresses actual events in Roman Catholic history that occurred in South America as the church and Spain argued over transfers of power with the Guarini while also trying to retain power and make money from the plantation owners who enslaved the Guarini. One man, the archbishop, holds in his hands the power to make choices in the name of God for the well-being of all concerned. Let's move on to the decision point. What decision does he make? He chooses the politically correct thing to do at the time and hands the missions over to Portugal so that the Jesuit order would not be thrown out of the country. His concern was preservation of the ecclesiastical order and out of this ecclesiastical concern (which supposedly represented the church and therefore God); he made an extremely political choice. The result? The death and destruction of innocent people. The missions were burned and the people killed to preserve an ecclesiastical order. Surely in this action God's will was not done on earth as in heaven.

The hardest part of the movie for me was that this story was not merely a dramatic portrayal with religious themes. Close enough to historical fact and close enough to the political fact of my own story, my heart ripped open in anguish and sadness. I was furious with the church for its concern of the promulgation of ecclesiastical orders over human lives. I was mad at God

because God did not step in and protect the people from this massacre, from the massacre of the inquisitions, from the massacre of souls that the church continues against homosexuals today.

As the movie ended, I ran to my car, embarrassed that I could not stop the tears and I knew that if anyone said anything I would respond in anger, "I hate the church!" I cried all the way home blinded by tears and anger that such a thing could happen in the "name of God", under the auspices of the "guardians of the faith."

Immediately I called my friend to talk about the movie and my pain. As I talked and cried, she said that she wished she could hug me. I did not want to be hugged. I was mad. As I continued to talk about it, my friend sought to comfort me and I felt resistance to her comfort. She listened to me and tried to comfort me as I expressed that it was okay that this hurt. At that point, I realized an important thing about life; sometimes it is good to hurt. When injustice happens, it is good to hurt because we are motivated to change, if not the situation, then we are moved to change our own hearts.

My heart, soul and mind hurt because innocent people were victims of political posturing. They were victims who were not just oppressed, but also slaughtered. As a person who seeks to be a witness to a loving and just God, I should hurt when things like this occur. When all of us see another of God's creatures abused or tortured in any way, hurting makes sense. In a time of injustice, it is good to hurt. It is good to hurt because it shows that somehow God has transformed our hearts to care about our neighbor. It is also good to hurt because that hurt can motivate and move us towards correcting the injustice. That hurt can move us to take action and take a stand against the destruction of our neighbor.

The story of this injustice made me want to live bolder and in more just ways. The hurt that occurred from the injustice portrayed in the movie opened my eyes to how anesthetized Christianity in the States has become. Christianity in the U.S. is a "feel good" opiate of the people. When Christ called us to follow, he did not say, "take up your praise song and follow me." Jesus said, "Take up your *cross* and follow me." I remind you that the cross is a symbol of torture and unfortunately has been used to torture others spiritually. At the same time, discomfort with that image of torture has made many soften the imagery by saying that Jesus meant burden rather than cross. Not everyone can be crucified. Or can we?

Whenever another human being is destroyed because of race, personal choice, or political/religious difference, Christ is crucified again. The God of love is nailed to the cross each time a human being is devalued, destroyed,

tortured. The God of love is pierced in the side each time we pollute and desecrate the environment that is God's sacred gift to us. Christ is alive and is still being crucified on this planet. When we are close to the heart of God, we will feel that crucifixion because we will be so empathetic with the God of love that we can feel the pain of the one suffering on the cross. We are then given the opportunity to make a choice. Do we decide to take the wine and vinegar that is lifted to our lips to ease the pain and thereby anesthetize us to what is going on around us? Or do we seek to experience the full pain of the suffering Christ?

To live into the suffering body of Christ is to experience the pain of crucifixion. When we hurt because another creature has been the victim of evil and destruction, it is our good will hurting. The good will that we sing of joyfully at Christmas is the very element of humanity that can change things for the better. It is only in following God's good will in us that injustice is stopped and love wins. It is okay if sometimes our good will is hurting. It means that we are hearing the cries of the poor and outcast calling for God to save them. It means that we are hearing the voice of God speaking into our existence to live more godly and just. Sometimes it is good to hurt because in those moments we choose the higher path as we listen to the voice of God speaking emphatically to us saying, "Take up your CROSS and follow me."

A Seed Planted for Healing

During the years following my loss of ministry, the times of turmoil and hardship were so overwhelming that I try to forget as much as possible. At the same time, if I forget those bad events, those bad years, I miss out on other blessings that happened in spite of the rough times. Shortly after leaving Advent I was hired by a small business in Charlotte to work as an office assistant. The owner, Bob, was a jolly and kind man and when I interviewed with him, I liked him immediately. He hired me and gave me a chance to learn something about small business operations. He was patient as he taught me how to write up quotes and gave me a way to make a living. Bob was a good boss, but more importantly, Bob was and is a good Christian man.

Being an engineer, Bob was also inquisitive. As we discussed his business, and how air pollution equipment works and where his company sold that equipment, it was natural that he would ask about my work as a pastor. I had explained about my health challenges and how I was trying to regain my health so I could one day return to ministry. I had been working at his business for several months before I was removed as a pastor and had not come out to my bishop when I had been hired. I had no intention of sharing my more personal story with Bob. That is until I learned more about Bob, his wife Peggy and their great hearts.

Both were active in their church and in the community helping with Habitat for Humanity and Meals on Wheels. The more I worked with Bob and got to know him and Peggy, the more I saw their kindness, interest in and acceptance of all people. I don't remember when, but one day I got brave and came out to them. They were so good to me. At that point, when my own family could not talk to me, they took me under their wings.

Bob and Peggy have exquisite leadership skills in knowing when to be a boss and when to be a person who cares and is compassionate about another. Having never worked for salesmen before, I was appalled when I made my first large mistake on a quote to a customer. The mistake could have cost Bob's company a lot of money. As I went to his office to apologize he was firm in saying, just make the changes and let the customer know. He added a statement that I still hold in my heart, "Everybody makes mistakes. What is important is that you learn from them." I had heard that before, but in light of such a big and costly mistake, and the kindness in his eyes, his words sunk in where the others had

not. As Peggy began to work in the office, she lived that same work ethic. While working for Bob and Peggy I saw the beautiful relationship they shared as a couple and a business team. Their work showed me how business can be both professional and full of justice and honesty.

As I continued to deal with health challenges, I began to seek ways to turn that problem into a ministry. Somehow, I wanted to be able to create a retreat place, a place of rest at my home where people could pray, heal and rest. Bob and Peggy supported me as I began to dream of a way to create a ministry. That Christmas, my office bonus was a futon for the guest room at my planned retreat center. On Secretary's Day, I was given the day off to go to a healing seminar about the power of healing prayer. I knew that in their gifts, they were giving me kindness, advice and hope as well as a job. They wanted good things for all of their employees and treated all with goodness, honesty and integrity. What they never knew is that their kindnesses to me during that time in my life were the part of God that kept me afloat while my life was sinking. They are still two of my favorite angels.

Souls In the Wilderess

Souls In the Wilderness

While I was in seminary, I began a study of the early monastic community called the desert fathers and mothers. These men and women left the institutional church in protest of its habits and went to live in the desert to focus on prayer, scripture and holy living. The writings are beautiful and filled with love and mercy and represented the type of faith and writing I wanted to come out of my life. After my removal from the church, I began to look toward a move to the desert in hopes that I could begin a life as a writer and by moving to the desert, I could also write beautifully about God's love and mercy.

If you've ever read any of the desert mothers and fathers, one of the first things they are clear on is that you don't have to move to the desert to experience a wilderness. I understood that my removal as a pastor was considered wilderness territory, but due to the pain I experienced, I also wanted to move to a different landscape. My friends had suggested the Painted Desert in Arizona or Taos, New Mexico. Then, I got involved with a woman from Oklahoma and of course, she wanted to move to Oklahoma. That seemed pretty much a wilderness to me. I remembered driving through the area and that it was flat with a different terrain. So we moved to Oklahoma where we lived for two years.

I bought a house about forty minutes from the nearest town, down three miles of dirt roads. There was fifteen acres of land with a dome cabin, separate guest quarter, shed and a sauna. The place had all the elements I thought would make a great place for retreat from the city and be a great place to pray. What I had not taken into consideration was the fact that I was no longer in my adventurous twenties. While I still felt adventurous, one does begin to slow down a bit as you approach forty. The house had no heat or air conditioning and to get a phone was so hard we eventually chose to go without one. We were out there. That put me in not only the wilderness of my soul, but also a physical wilderness and I was not prepared for the angst and pain that would arise in that time and place.

New Life

The summer is hot and dry, burning into life like a desert. Drought is upon the county and all of life is endangered. Concerns grow for the food and water supply. Into this scene flies a butterfly. The colors of its wings blend in with the flower it lands upon. The butterfly is a reminder that we are promised new life. In all of our hopes, struggles and fears, we are promised that new life can be ours.

New life can be hard to see, sometimes blending into nature's background. We often cannot see the new life because the pain can block it out. Do not be fooled for new life exists in pain's shadow, a quiet, soft promise, whispering to our spirits. A promise that is delicate and tender, so beautiful that you reach out to touch, but in that reaching it flies away. It is a promise of new life—not something for you to grasp and cling to, but something to give hope in the bleakest moment. Do not despair. Do not lose hope. Just wait and the promise will fly back to you. Be patient and pray. New life will come, we have the promise.

Lightning Fear

Bright, white lightning flashes through my home's skylights like a strobe light show, keeping me awake, flashing fear in my heart. Looking at the skylight, I strain to see if the pecking sound I hear is hail. Manmade power flickers off several times while nature's power flickers on, lighting up the darkness of the heavens. There may be a tornado in this Oklahoma wilderness so I watch craggy oaks waving like demons in the flickering spaces of lightning.

Searching for the origin of my fear of lightning, I remember my dad's lightning stories. When the rare lightning storm occurred in North Carolina, Dad hurried to unplug everything to prevent fireballs he said could race through the electrical lines and destroy anything plugged into the socket. If you were near a television, then it would come directly out of the television at you and kill you. Dad told other gruesome stories of electricity grabbing a person and not letting go.

Never a child who liked frightening stories, Dad's stories scared me beyond measure. Battling this old fear, the lightning flashes and cracks loudly somewhere near my house and I jump from the noise, wondering if it hit a tree nearby. Covering my eyes with my grandma's flannel quilt, I find momentary relief from the fear, but I cannot breathe well with my face covered up. The fear flickers and booms in my heart like the timpani of thunder and I want a dark place away from the view of lightning, a place where there is fresh air.

The storm dies to a soft flicker and I finally doze deep into sleep and dream. Within that dream, I fall asleep and dream again, a dream within a dream. I lie on my back on the sidewalk beside of a tan office building when suddenly, in broad daylight; there sounds a loud clap of thunder. I look up in time to see a bolt of lightning reach over the building. The bolt recognizes me and reaches its hand to grab me. I push the person near me away realizing that I am going to die in the path of the lightning. The bolt goes straight to my chest grabbing hold with its power. Surprisingly, the lightning does not hurt and instead of killing me, it shakes my body with a fierce but odd kind of jolt seeking to bring me back to life. I scream the entire time I am in the hold of the lightning, but it is fear not pain causing my outcry. Waiting for the moment of death, I sense the lightning bolt giving me some kind of power, some kind of energy that is not electricity.

In the first dream, my lover tries to awaken me from the bad dream, but the lightning holds me fast in the fist of power and will not let me go until it is ready.

Finally, the bolt retreats and I awaken to my lover's concern about my screaming. Momentarily I stay in the dream state, telling my lover about the lightning bolt dream. Slowly I awaken to the world of consciousness and can feel the effects of the lightning in my heart.

I awaken to the night and feel energy in my heart from the lightning dream encouraging inner strength. Then the storm comes again but this time it is an emotional storm; raging emotions wreak havoc on my heart. Angry words hail down on the light of my being and cause damage although not fatal; it is painful enough to feel like death. The pain lingers through the night rushing like angry water sweeping away my beautiful meadows of peace; raining tears flood my being pushing over my trees of strength. Sleep eludes me again so I walk into the moonlit night to seek relief from the pain and see a flickering in the distance.

Now on the horizon, lightning flickers silently like fireworks in the sky dancing clockwise then counter clockwise over the tops of the trees. I watch the ritual of the lightning and remember my dream. There was some kind of peace in the dream even in the midst of the terror and remembering that peace in the midst of the emotional night seems like hope. The night is quiet with only the storm raging in my heart and the lightning far in some other town. The clock tick tocks softly and I hear the soft sound of the dogs sleeping nearby. Somehow, in this night, in the midst of my emotional storm, there is peace in the lightning on the horizon.

I do not know if the peace comes because of the dream or because the lightning danger is far away: far away enough from my reality that I can be detached from it. Yet, I cannot but help remember the dream of how the lightning shook me into consciousness, how I was not harmed by it but given some kind of power. I watch the lightning flicker on the horizon and hope that somewhere, deep in my soul it's true.

Pain Knows No God

Pain knows no God; anguish no deity With despair swallowing spirit life falls into insanity.

The human cries out in atheism agnosticism Marxism whatever belief...or lack of belief systematically acknowledges the absence of God in human form; denying the power of God the ability to dwell in one's own flesh.

Yet, does God cease to exist?

Is there a time when God is not near?

If God is a feeling then yes...

If God is a thought then yes,
there is no God because there

are times when life is

so hard and painful

that all feelings and

thoughts collide into

the chaos of nothingness;

again,

nothing

that you know.

So how can one know

God

Is...

Here Dwelling In our Deepest Darkness.

Death

Standing in the middle of nowhere my mind spoke in dull derision and grief, “I’m going to die here.” I looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings that are now my new home. It is an untamed place. Poison surrounds the house on not only the ground but also growing up the trees. Coyotes howl at night a sound that is lonesome and haunting. Sometimes the sound is a good sound because it speaks to a lonesome, haunting place in my heart, but I also know that the pack of coyotes can cause harm and can be a source of danger, if not to me, at least to my sweet friendly outside dog. The hollow pounding of a Native American drum echoes through the woods. I live in the land of the Pottawatomie but did not know of a Pow-Wow grounds near my home. At first the drumming startled me to fear, but after hearing the drums for a few nights, I began to like the sound. I had never heard Native drumming in the night, only on recordings. While the sound is peaceful to me now, I am also reminded of pioneer days when that sound could seem threatening and so again, the unfamiliarity resounds of potential danger.

Moving to Oklahoma was to be a new beginning, a new start, a life of hope and love. The actuality soon started being clear: life in Oklahoma was just as hard, if not harder than life in the Carolinas. Life that had my love by my side in the Carolinas was now life that was threatening to take that love away. Not only could I be alone in this unfamiliar land, here, in Tecumseh, Oklahoma, I was in a wilderness that I did not know. In moving here, I hoped that it would be where I lived for the remainder of my days. When my mind spoke of my death, I thought that it was the physical reality, that this is where I have chosen to live out the remainder of my days and that it would be a lonely existence until my death. Instead, I have come to realize that I will die here to everything that I have been in my life. While this is not necessarily bad, it is always painful to die. It is always painful to see your illusions of self, love, the world shot down like a bandit, and it was a bandit that you loved.

Peace

Even when your world is in a tilt, there are moments of deep, abiding peace. Moments where you are captivated by the beauty of life and that beauty gives you peace. Sitting by still waters, watching the sun fade, nature reminds you that there is calm after the storm...and a necessity to restore your soul. Sometimes all you need to do is be still and let go. Watch the colors of the evening sky change from blue to gold. Hear the calm water lap quietly at the shore while a hawk cries in the distance. There is healing...there is calm. Be still and let the peace revive your soul.

Answers

Some days life is a drought, parched, barren, hot, dusty days that won't end. Heat that won't let up. It is all one can do to endure. As the heat temperatures rise, so does the temper and impatience. The sun burns into the dust and the dust burns into you. All you want is for the drought to end. You want to be restored and refreshed. You need water—the water of life.

Hidden on each path there is a fountain for you. A place of refreshing. The shade of the trees shelters you from the sun's attack. The water washes your hands, neck, face and feet, providing water for your thirst. You have to look for your fountain. Perhaps your fountain is visiting with friends or visiting a place of worship. The water that restores you may be your art or physical activity. The fountain may be reading a good book or watching the sunset, watching birds or catching fish. There is a fountain for you, a place of rest from the burning hells of life. The fountain's water flows deep and cool along each path with different outlets along the way. The fountain is there and it lies within you.

Broken

The first thing to realize is that you are broken. Life has its storms and each living thing has its limits. One wind of change too many can blow you apart somehow. Open wounds to the road. Beaten and worn, in the wilderness no one hears your cry. There is so much hurt and loss. Dreams are shattered and realities are harsh. There is a haunting loneliness in accepting the grief. At the same time, there is something beautiful in the sorrow. No longer is there an illusion of formidable strength...only the truth that sometimes there is weakness, sometimes life can tear you down. The tears flood your soul as you begin to let go.

Desolation

Dreams fire our soul and guide us through the dreary desolation of life. What do you do when your dreams are burned to the ground? When your hope is turned to ashes? The landscape of your soul turns black and gray, and all seems lost. You smell ashes beneath your feet as they crunch and crackle. You grieve the lost life, and the hard work lost in preparing the dream. It would be easy to become lost in the grief and desolation. Grief, pain, anger and tears are necessary when you lose a part of your life, a part of your existence. Do not become lost in that desolation, for the earth of your soul is fertile and life giving. The nature of the soul is to grow and flourish even in the midst of despair.

After a forest fire, the land is desolate and scorched, with no sign of life. However, the earth remains fertile and some trees that appear dead are still holding on to life. The rain falls, the sun shines, and it is not long before new life begins to sprout. No, it is not the same and the forest landscape changes dramatically, but life returns to the forest. The earth will heal and the green landscape will return in time.

So it is with your soul. No matter what happens, your soul is the fertile ground of your being. New seeds of hope will grow and heal the pain of your loss. Things will not be the same, but that does not mean that things won't be better. The healing will take time as you discern what new dreams to nurture, but things will not be desolate forever. The rain of your tears and the sun of God's love will restore your soul. Do not give up. Life will come again.

Prayer

I always said that I was nothing without You.
I knew it intuitively and never tried life without You.
Then one day in my anger at You I left, the prodigal trying my
own way.
Now I have tried
life without You and the
empty
blank space of my life is
hollow
screams at me in pain and terror.
I am indeed nothing without You
...truth grips me in the depth of my despair.
Lord, save me from the nothing I've become,
redeem me; recreate me into your servant.
I am nothing without You
and the pain too much to bear.

Soul Tracks

Standing on a railroad tie between the tracks, my mind wanders. The tracks lead somewhere. In the wilderness, it's really hard to tell and on bad days it's hard to care. Then there are those days when you dream that the tracks lead you away from wallowing in misery and self-pity.

However, if you sit and pray, you begin to see that the tracks lead into you. You are the starting point. The tracks are not just hard cold metal cutting through the dirt, but somehow they tell you something about yourself. Somehow they ask you the question, "Are you coming or going?"

Falling Night

Dusk falls as shadows of the unknown creep in. The sun is still a pinpoint of light, but darkness comes quickly in unfamiliar territory. Each sound is startling as the chill of the evening sets in. The darkness magnifies ancient trees reaching their scraggly arms to the sky. With each moment, the descending darkness magnifies fear. Night falls. There are no street lights. No familiar houses or people. Only a strange darkness covering you like some insane madness.

A Dream Day

There are days of beauty in the wilderness, moments of reprieve from the sadness and hurt. At times you ask yourself, “How can things be so beautiful on the outside when I feel so awful inside?” The beauty of nature brings forth a longing for your inner beauty and solitude to return.

In those times, nature reminds us that we have hope; that in time, our wounds will heal. Though the storms of life have ravaged the landscapes of our dreams, the earth of our soul remains firm. The skies of our dreams will turn blue again with puffy white clouds of new dreams. The healing may take time, but it will come.

Dark and Light

My challenge in life has been to accept that there can be good in the darkness as well as the light. Sometimes what makes a picture catch your eye and pay attention is the way the shadows contrast the light. Seeing shadows gives depth to the pictures. Of course, if there were only shadows there would be no picture because it is the light that calls forth the image, the focus.

In life, we are made of shadows and light. I have spent my life trying to be only light and to cast away my shadows when the shadows are still an integral, and dare I say, necessary part of me. Only God can be pure light. We are the humans. The ones made from the light of God, but the shadow of humanity. As I faced the shadows of my life in the wilderness, I was terrified. Not only because I tend to be afraid in the dark, but also because I had to see the truth hidden in those shadows. Like any other human being, there lay in me the potential to be a thief, a murderer, all of the things I never wanted to be. The potential was there waiting to show me that I am no better than anyone else is, even when I made better choices. The truth of that shadow almost crippled me because I always wanted to be good so that God would love me and so that I would love myself. Now here is the irony of it all.

Only by facing my shadow side, my own darkness, did I realize the depth of God's love. For even in my darkest places, my darkest moments, God was and is ever present loving me there. God is not encouraging me to become the darkness, but merely showing love in the deepest darkness of my life, telling me not to be afraid. I am loved even with my faults and darkness. In that, recognition of God's love was planted a seed. That seed is one of hope, love and acceptance of me as a pure gift from God. The shadows of my existence will always be there, but they do not have the power to ruin the picture of my life. The constant challenge will be to accept the shadows and use the light to create beauty out of darkness.

Sanctuary

I remember walking into the Catholic chapel at St. Gregory's University. The warm red candlelight gives a soothing glow in the sanctuary's cool darkness. Bright light casts brilliant colors of hope and promise into the darkness of my prayers. How often have I sought protection and hope in the brick mortar of a sanctuary? Safe in the tomb of the institution, it seems that nothing can harm you...until your sanctuary of brick and mortar crumbles. Then what?

Thoughts and anxiety awaken me and I turn to prayer. The wilderness is miles from a church to hide in, but that does not mean there is no sanctuary, no safe place. In my fear and anxiety I turn to the Psalms and find God's sanctuary is praying for me. *Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, "you are my Lord; I have no good apart from you."* Psalm 16:1-2 That is the gift of the wilderness – to remind us of where our sanctuary lies.

Sanctuary is not in buildings of brick and stone that crumble and fall. Sanctuary is not in a community of humans prone to incorrect judgment and human error. Sanctuary is in God alone. God as sanctuary goes before each of us into the darkness, guiding with fire at night and clouds by day. God is always close at hand, as close as your breath. Sanctuary lives inside our hearts and we are never alone, never without help...even when it feels that way.

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a godly heritage. I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night, also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore, my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence, there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

Psalm 16: 5-11 NRSV

Fly Away

Endless days fold into endless nights and time is forever. The dreariness weighs heavy upon the soul as you long for release from the burdens. You long to fly again; not to a particular destination although sometimes anywhere else is better than where you are.

Fatigue

When life is hard, it takes its toll upon all of your being. Your mind is tired, your soul, emotions and body are tired. you just want to sleep through it all as if sleeping could make the difficulties go away. While we must be gentle with ourselves in those times, we must go onward. The promise that belongs to us is one for a hope and a future. God is the strength for us as we trudge through our miseries. It is hard to trust that promise but that promise is ours. Rest for a while. Be gentle with yourself...but always get up, go on, get back on the path that leads you out of the darkness.

Painful

I've often asked myself, "Does the journey have to be painful?" Unfortunately, I think the answer is yes. The path is not that we seek to suffer, but when you journey through the unknown painful things happen. Facing the truth about a loved one or yourself can cause pain. The pain can be a barrier causing us to want to get off our path, stop the journey because none of us enjoy pain. The irony of it again is that we must go through the pain in order to heal. There are wounds in our soul that must be lanced and tended. There are things in our life that need to be removed because they hinder our journey, our growth and our healing.

I was telling my friend that my trip to the wilderness was like a trip to the hospital for a major operation. The experience has been painful and I'll be so glad to get out. At the same time, I can see my need to be in the hospital and be present to the pain. In the end, the pain could be the best thing that happened to me even though it hurts like hell. Here is some of what my pain has revealed to me:

I'm not perfect. I'm just as human as anyone on this earth and that's good because I am created to be human.

I make mistakes. The mistakes can happen for a variety of reasons but are mostly due to being human.

It is okay to make mistakes. There are lessons in our mistakes and there is forgiveness. A good boss once told me after I made a huge error, "You're gonna make mistakes. If you don't make mistakes you're not doing anything. Just be more careful the next time."

These are just a few things I'm learning, but they are painful lessons I needed to face about myself and about others around me. Facing these truths caused great pain because above all else, I want to be a good person. However, if I had never faced these things I would have missed out on a better gift that God planned for me, for in facing these painful truths, I found mercy.

Intentional Thankfulness

Thankfulness does not come easy when life hurts and times are hard. Actually, it's usually the last thing on our minds. To be intentionally thankful however, can be a way to survive the turmoil. Yes, your world may be falling to pieces but there are still good things present even in your life. Give thanks that the sky is blue or that you can hear birds sing. Give thanks that there was at least one person who was kind to you or that you have a home. I'll be honest and say that sometimes it doesn't work, the pain is too great...but a lot of the time, it does work. Intentional thankfulness does not change your situation or your hurt. All it does is opens your eyes to the blessings that ARE yours...even when you hurt.

Like the Sun

I'm holding a picture of a sunset, a mirror image of sun shining on a glimmering surface. Looking at a picture of the sun, the warm colors reach out, soothing and warm. You would think that it is warm the way the sun shines in the picture, the sunset a peaceful ending to a warm, cozy day. What the picture cannot portray however is how cold and hard the wind blows. The golden reflection is not a mirror of water, but cold, hard ice. The weather so cold it seems that even the sun cannot melt away the hardness and danger before you.

People can often appear that way, a sunny façade presented to hide a cold hardness below. We believe our love to be the sun that will melt away the cold. Yet, it seems that no matter how much we love, sometimes the weather is so severe there will never be warmth.

We must remember the sun and its persistence. Day in and day out, the sun shines even when it is hidden from view. The sun does not pick a project or cause, the sun simply is what it is, and in its being brings forth life, light and warmth. Our love must be the same, day in and day out shining from the core of our existence. On some days, love will be hidden from others because of the clouds of doubts. There will be times when our love melts away the cold, hurt of another and brings forth new life from the earth of that person's life.

There will be other times that our love seems useless against the frozen landscape of another's life. Again, remember the sun, for even on the coldest days, it shines and the landscape gradually becomes softer. Our love will not save another or change another, but when we love, love abides and grows in us. Love allows us to be who we are. The more we are present to love and our own self, the more we shine the light of hope and healing for others.

Answers

The days are hard when you are bombarded with one trauma after another. You cry out, “when will it ever end?” You scream to heaven, “how can I survive this extreme pain and loss?” There are no answers. There are plenty of opinions about how and why things happen, but they are opinions and not solutions and not always wise. Pain and anguish haunt you, relentless ghosts of the mistakes made, things left undone. Those ghosts boo and hiss telling you that you are doomed and then fear grows and causes more pain and anguish. Despair sets in to darken the mood. There seems to be no answer to your dilemma; but there is an answer.

The answer sits silent and golden in the midst of your darkness. The answer is a hidden treasure that lies within your reach, but you have to be bold enough and brave enough to reach for that answer. If you cannot see the answer, look for it feeling with your hands or sniffing it out. The answer is within your reach, ignore the haunting of your mind and find that treasure in your soul. The task of reaching through the pain is not an easy task, but the answer is your treasure and the way out of the present misery. All you have to do is let go of your fear and pain and reach instead for the answer. You will know it by its light and hope.

Survival

When life gets real, and gets real hard and fast, you are face to face with survival. You must survive your family and friends' disbelief in you. You must survive the revelations that you don't know all the answers. You must survive all of the natural disasters that decide to happen around you as well as within you.

We lived in a dome heated with wood in the middle of nowhere. We learned quickly that you must survive through the cold of winter as you gather wood to keep the house warm, keep the fire going or find a plumber to replace broken pipes when the fire goes out. You must survive the death of your best dog, your sweet goat and the chickens you bought. Somewhere in all the survival, you begin to grow strength and from that strength grows faith in God and yourself, and your ability to keep moving on to the next goal.

From that new faith grows gratitude as you begin to remember that no matter how hard it is at the moment, no matter how much you are hurting, there is someone else in the world that would willingly die to have your blessings.

Friends

Tragedy and loss have a way of showing us our true friends. Sometimes the truth that comes out in moments of tragedy and loss are not something we want to face. Some who have once been friends cannot handle our pain. Who knows why? The struggles may remind them of their own struggles, leading them to fear that the same tragedy could befall them. During the hard times, you need friends the most, even though you may be embarrassed at your failure, your blindness or weakness. Spinning out of control, the tragedy of life leaves you to feel more alone than ever.

Here is how you recognize your true friends. A true friend is one who leaves a flower and a note to remind you that you're not alone. A true friend listens to you weep one more time, lovingly disagrees with your wrong choices, but does not write you off. A true friend tells you that they have seen your goodness and worth from the very beginning. A true friend can disagree with you and even give you a reality kick, without ever belittling your personhood. Life, along with its tragedies, has a way of showing that there are only a few people who will be true friends, but you also learn that those few friends remain a priceless, sacred gift.

Ireverent

There is no way to describe how the wilderness feels. There is no pretense. Nature strips away the props of today, the college degree, the talent and the illusions. The wilderness cuts to the core of your identity, stripping away the façade, the mask you wear in society. The wilderness seems to know all of your dark truths, even if you don't. One by one, the wilderness shows them to you.

Mirage

Get out! Sometimes all you want is a way to escape your pain and turmoil. Find rescue and ride safely into the sunset. During those times, hope only seems a mirage on the horizon—something to tease you and cause you more anguish. You know deep within you that the only way out is to go one day, one step at a time towards the light. Turmoil weighs a heavy and tiresome burden from the journey. Your spirit and body thirst for streams of peace to revive and sustain you; purifying your dusty soul.

Journey slow. Be easy on yourself. You have come a long way. The light you need is not a mirage, even if it seems far away. The light of hope, beaming from the horizon, burns in your heart. That light is not a mirage. Keep your eyes on the light. Rest a moment...cry a moment...but don't ever give up. Always go toward the light.

Night

The wilderness is hard, an eternal darkness. Hope drifts in faintly, but sweet and faint as honeysuckle. As day dawns, a morning moon hangs low in the east as if to say, "This night isn't over yet," not as a threat, just the truth stated plain and simple. Sure enough, night falls again.

One can walk unaware in the light, but to walk in the night uses more of the human senses. First, you must give your eyes time to adjust to the darkness. Then your ears must listen for danger. The journey is slow because you must proceed with care and caution. On some nights, the brightness of the moon illuminates the forest making it a silent haven, an exquisite portrait of solitude or magical like a fairytale. In those nights, hope twinkles like stars.

There are darker nights as well. Nights where you cannot see your own hand before you, and you are afraid of every move and every sound. The darkness seems infinite and dangerous as a black hole in space, threatening to swallow your life. Your heart and mind cry out to God, "Do not leave me desolate!" and you hear the lonely echo. You wait in the silence and while there is yet no answer, somehow you know God is there.

No Trespassing

The weathered sign is perfectly legitimate in its request, but it makes me laugh – NO TRESPASSING? The laughter is not one of defiance, but comes as a result of the sign's placement, for it is on a dead tree in the middle of a vast field on the edge of Oklahoma and Kansas. Miles and miles of nothing surround the barren field, and here on a lone, dead tree are the words "No Trespassing." What might someone think a trespasser would do in such a desolate place? Standing by the tree there is mystical silence, with only the wind whipping past, whipping your clothes, whipping the grass but there is nothing else.

Zen Buddhism teaches that the spiritual journey should lead us into nothing, where no-thing can separate us from union with God. Christian mysticism is similar in its path of unknowing. To enter into this place of "nothingness" and to walk the path of "unknowing" is sacred soul work, not to be taken lightly. One book, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, literally warns the reader to be careful in reading the book. In some sense, the preface is a NO TRESPASSING sign on a dead tree in the wilderness. I laughed at that preface when I first read it. Later on, I realized that it was there for good reason.

When you seek to encounter God, you are going the way of the wilderness. The sign or warning does not mean that the spiritual seeker should keep away, but rather recognizing that one is journeying to the sacred space of God...in the silent, still place of nothing that you know.

Mystery Road

Driving through the wilderness of Pottawatomie County one evening we came up to a road to nowhere with a gate to keep you from driving on the road, but no fence on either side of the gate. You could see for miles and there was nothing, no reason to see that you would want to drive further down the road. The barrier however, gave a warning that there could be treachery. The road tracked over the dirt hill to something beyond nothing, for there was nothing where we stopped and nothing as far as the eye could see. Yet the road beckoned with no hint of its destination and no promise of good things to come.

Take an adventure with your soul and move into a wilderness that promises only a journey. Move away from the world, away from the illusions of your present life. The road calls you, don't be afraid of where it might lead. Don't worry with the questions, just get on the mystery road and walk into the nothing.

Holy Ground

Farther down the road we see an odd thing. Again, there was nothing and nobody around, but on one of the fence posts hung a boot. Turned upside down on the corner fence post was an old boot showing evidence of an earlier traveler. The boot in its own way gives hope in this desolate place, hope that someone else passed this way; some other person took that road and journeyed ahead. The road is dusty and soon a lone hawk screams through the sky. The wind is always blowing in Oklahoma. I look at the lone boot in the middle of nowhere and my spirit thinks of Moses and the burning bush. Take off your shoes. You are walking on holy ground.

Dreams In the Wild

What are dreams in the wilderness? Apparitions of the mind cast into darkness? Silly wishes that seem preposterous in the face of survival? Yet, this is the very thing that makes dreams become reality: challenges that cause you to cling to the dreams and nurture them in the most dire moments. How much do you want the dreams? Do you believe enough to keep believing against all odds? Do you believe enough to keep working to make those dreams materialize one-step, one day at a time?

In the beginning, it seems the wilderness will strip you of your dreams, of your ability to hope ever again. Then, somewhere in the darkness, somewhere in the wild place of life, you begin to see how powerful one dream may become. Especially if that dream is yours.

Refiners Fire

All elements have a certain amount of impurities mixed in. Dirt and clay make pottery, but in order to make a smooth and beautiful pot, the rocks, sticks and leaves must be removed. Precious metals must be put through the refiner's fire to remove impurities that weaken the metal. To speak of a potter making a useful pot or a metalworker making a strong tool, is to understand the importance of refining its substance so that all of humanity is served. However, when it is your own self thrown into the refiner's fire, it becomes a different story. Although we may realize the importance of having flaws and impurities burned out of our lives, those flaws and impurities have been a part of our substance, part of our way of being. The stone that constantly causes us to stumble may be a problem, but it is familiar. The flaw in our character that makes us weak and ineffectual may prevent us from obtaining our dreams, but it is the only way we have ever known.

The only way to be a good, strong vessel is to allow the imperfections to be removed. The only way to reach the dream is to let go of the flaws. It hurts. We are not dirt or clay and we are not precious metal. We are human and the act of purification hurts. Sometimes getting past the obstacles in our lives and getting through the issues making us weak hurts so badly that all we can think of is getting out of the fire. If it is a fire that destroys your hopes, dreams and the essence of your soul, get out. That is the fire of destruction. Do not be subject to abuse and oppression.

However, if the pain happens only because you are seeing the truth in your life and the purification that will ultimately make you a better person, hold on a while longer. There is a work of art in progress. You are being made into something beautiful, important and good. The fire will stop. The pain will subside and you will shine brighter than ever.

Freed

God heard my cries.

My tears fell upon God's soft, tender, warm and compassionate heart.

The straight-jacket with which you bound me began to loosen.

Circulation returned to my arms.

God gave me strength and courage.

I asked you to leave.

You said you loved me.

Reminded me that I loved you.

Tried to imprison me again, but God freed me.

God was my deliverer and you my captor.

You, the tyrant punishing me for how others had hurt you.

You could no longer see me and with scourging hot words, you had blinded me to the goodness of myself.

Now who will pray for me that you will let me go forever? Who will pray for me that I will be healed of the wound that still pours hot blood and tears when I least expect it? Who will pray for me that I will be strengthened to ward you off and protect my tender soul? Who will pray for me that I might receive love and kindness? Who will pray for the recovery of my soul and health? Who will pray for ME?

I will.

Because I AM a good and kind and loving, I will pray for myself. Because I AM a person of worth and value, I will pray for my protection. Because I AM intelligent and talented, I will pray for my healing. Because I AM worthy of love and tenderness, I will pray to receive the tenderness of the world. Because I AM a child of God, I will pray for my spirit to regain its wholeness.

Sometimes I still feel imprisoned by the remnants of grief, pain and loss – your gifts to me. But I will be released from them and I will be healed, because someone will pray for me.

Who will pray for me?

Through the grace of God, out of great love for myself,

I will.

Safe Harbor

Life storms and blows harsh on some days. The winds howl like hungry demons, thunder rumbles an earthquake beneath your feet. The storm tosses you about, causing you to lose your bearing. Once I asked a weathered friend how to endure the storm and she responded, “Always go towards the light.”

On stormy, dangerous coasts, there is always a lighthouse to guide ships into safe harbor. To find that point of light in the stormy weather is to keep your ship afloat, keep it from crashing to shore. To find the guiding light within our own spirit is how we keep our lives from sinking and being lashed to pieces. To find that light is to claim a space in our souls where there is always safe harbor from the storm.

The challenge is finding which light best leads you to safe harbor, the calm still place where you can rest. Each person carries that light deep within waiting for recognition. Find a quiet place, be still and listen to your heart and mind. Follow the light of your soul through the heavy fog and rain. When the storm tosses you about, keep your sight on finding the light within you for light is always greater than any darkness, and the strength of your light is so powerful that it will deliver you to a safer place.

When I first considered how to go to the light it was a sunny day outside, but life inside of me a crashing, dangerous storm. My way of seeking the light is through quiet prayer, music or writing. Those are actions that guide me through every storm and always point to an unexpected safe harbor which is the light of my identity, for that is the greatest guiding light we have. To be the person God created us to be no matter what life storms on our shores.

Fear

Fear waits in the darkness of our psyche, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Fear is a coward looking for our vulnerabilities, our weakness. Fear will attack with ferocity to rob our self-esteem, our dreams, and our love—anything we value. Fear is a four-letter word, a self-inflicted curse disguised as a protector, for there are times, people and places that we should fear. There are dangers in this world that have substance and form and those dangers would cause us harm.

The challenge is to discern what is truly harmful. Sometimes fear is obvious and we should listen: guns, murderers, drugs and thieves. However there are so many times that fear disguises itself as a friend to discourage us from following our dreams, from being true to self or accepting love or protecting another from harm. In those moments, fear can anesthetize us with a poison so deadly that we could lose everything and then it becomes obvious why you always hear, “the only thing to fear is fear itself.”

Tearing Down

To begin anew often means tearing down the old ways, thoughts, habits and beliefs. Tearing something down seems easy enough when you know that there is something that needs to be trashed and hauled away. However, when the tearing down is close to your soul there is pain and none of us like pain, even though we may be fighting unnecessary garbage in our lives.

Through prayer and meditation, we may see the need to be more loving and kind. To get to that point may mean tearing down layers of fear or anger—perhaps both. Not only is the tearing down of unhealthy ways painful because of the issues it raises, but in those moments we fully recognize our vulnerability and frailness. We see ourselves as we truly are—human beings seeking a good path through a hard life. If in those moments we can reach out to God, we will be led out of the shambles of our pain and misery. To reach out to God in those moments is to let go of the trash in our lives no matter how familiar it is to us.

The process is to recognize what is causing harm in your life and accept the fact that it is harming you. Then tear it down. Tear it down by working with a counselor, talking to a safe friend, praying or journaling. Tear it down by crying or admitting your anger, fear and hurt. Tear it down to the ground for the trash that it is, then take the next important and healing step...let it go. Let it go and walk away. You will never forget the garbage or the wrecking of your life, but you don't have to live there. Tear it down, let it go and walk away.

Life Between the Pages

In writing my journal, I find long spaces of time between writings as though life was blank between the dates of writing. All the pages in between leave something out. Leave something unsaid. The blank pages show I'm truly afraid to write about hardship. If I can write about it, I only write when I can see light and hope, but in the between pages there are days missing where life hurts so badly I don't write or can't write. It is almost as if writing down my hurts proves them true or makes them a larger reality than they are. I'm going to start writing the in between pages because they tell the whole truth. The whole truth is that all of us are subject to pain in this life; raw aching pain that sometimes cannot be explained. Pain that chooses us, and sadly, pain we sometime choose for ourselves.

Life is not all pretty. Of course, we know that, especially since we tend to hold onto the bad. We cling to pain as if it tells a larger story than our good, and perhaps in a way it does. Our larger reality is that we are human and in our humanity is built an incontrovertible flaw, vulnerability. Vulnerability is the one thing all personalities share because no matter how you dress it up, it's there. No weaponry or glamour can hide it. No attitude can make it disappear. No food or anti-social act can insulate us from the fact that we are all vulnerable and in some way need each other even if we don't like each other.

The irony of it all is that it appears our dislike of each other is fostered by our feelings of vulnerability.

Great mystics would state that those we fear or dislike the most are often the most like us. Sometimes the people we dislike exacerbate the feeling of vulnerability. Even as we dislike another, our action points to vulnerability. Vulnerability is something no living creature can escape. Yet, to love someone is to feel safe within our vulnerability. Perhaps that's what great art does; exposes us to our vulnerability in a way that makes us feel secretly safe.

Not Celebrating Advent

December 4th, 2002

Christmas is upon us. I'm not celebrating Advent. There are some things you have to wait for and some things you don't. Skipping Advent this year is not about my impatience, but what I see as hope; the hope of Christmas. Jesus the Christ is not someone to look to in the future, but someone in the here and now. In another word—Immanuel—"God with us." Not "God will be with us one day" but "God with us."

The past six years have been the hardest years of my life. There has been so much loss, so many mistakes, unbelievable hurts and betrayals. I have seen sides of my personality that I never wanted to know and seen people do harm to one another that is abominable. Here is the good news I've seen. Merry Christmas. Every day, God was with me, my often-silent partner. No matter how bad things were, God was right there beside me. No matter how bad I was, God was right there with me. This is a God who will soar with you through the highest heaven or tromp beside you through the crap of Sheol. It is easy to have faith and believe in God when things are going good, much harder with turmoil. Immanuel—God with us anyway.

When I lost my pastorate, God was there crying with me. When people supported me, God rejoiced with me. When I was suffering, God nourished me and when it seemed I would lose my mind from pain, God was my sanity. When I could see not good or value in myself, God kept loving me. Immanuel. Immanuel. God with me through every moment never failing in love and devotion to ME of all people. This is the news you must remember. The name is "Immanuel – God with US." God is with you too. Not tomorrow or in the future, but in every now of your existence. And Immanuel is loving you now, constantly being born into your life to give you hope NOW! You do not have to wait for God to love you or redeem you. Immanuel, Immanuel—our blessed Lord is with you now, loving every atom of your being. Merry Christmas. What a gift! Wow—Immanuel "God with us." Amen

Do Not Deny Me Sorrow

Do not deny me my sorrow.
Do not excuse my mistake as mere humanity.
God believes humanity redeemable.
The Spirit believes humanity powerful.
Any way you look at the situation, I failed.
I failed God.
Do not deny me my sorrow
Or use my humanity to cover up
the fact that I failed.
Yes, there is mercy and forgiveness from God,
but truth has no mercy.
The truth is my fear overcame my faith and in that moment
I failed you.
Do not deny me my sorrow.
I accept my humanity
its frailty and see my mistake for what it is.
I believe that God will redeem and forgive.
I believe that the Spirit will work good out of my mistake.
But for now, the truth that
I failed God and
I failed you
is unbearable because I love you both....
And in my moment of great fear,
I not only failed those I love
but I failed myself.

Humble Me

Nora Jones sings a song called *Humble Me*. Sung in simplicity with quiet vocal and simple accompaniment the words, voice, instrument and melody all cry out the truth every human has experienced. The song is unclear what the singer is mourning as she sings a sincere plaintiff. Yet, the more I listen the more I believe the writer is asking forgiveness for mistakes made from not knowing; not knowing how to deal with something or the consequence of an action made when it was unclear what path should be taken. The path of unknowing is the path of our humanity and it is a path that daily humbles us as we continue to seek answers to the questions in life. In those times of unknowing we often turn to God pleading for help and guidance in our helplessness, in our states of unknowing. The anonymous writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is the only writer I know of who started a book with a warning. This unknown mystic knew that the thing that often scares us the most as humans is the fact that we “don’t know.”

I remember as a child asking my mother copious questions about life and God. She would answer as many questions as she could but the final answer was, “Robin, I don’t know that. Only God knows that.” I credit that moment as one that kept me turning to God, seeking to know this Being, this One we call “God” who knows all the answers to all questions and all the reasons why. As a child wanting to be a missionary, a young adult working in the local church and later as a pastor, I read everything I could seeking to learn more about God and more about how to live a good and godly life. Many beautiful writings, by scholars and mystics alike, show us aspects of God where we begin to think about who God is and our place in relationship to this being. Experiences in prayer and worship bring us closer into a space set aside for experiencing the grace of this being we call God. Then....well, we come to the reality of our lives where nothing is clear. Our technology, our climate, our families and jobs present us with dangerous opportunities for growth. We are left with the unknown mystery of life and God.

What is the right and godly action or choice in life? That question is the one we each face in our hope to live the life of a follower of Christ. What does it mean to be a follower of Christ? How can we know God and how can we know Christ, this ancient figure presented to us in historical documents that are not clear themselves?

A professor from the Lutheran seminary in Chicago once spoke out saying, "You cannot know God." The statement was the premise of his presentation on how we cannot truly define spirituality. The statement made me angry because there are ways that we can know God. Now, in the mystery called life at middle age, I understand more clearly. The more facts you know, the truth becomes clear that the less you know about life, God and the meaning of life. I hear the plaintiff singing a song my spirit understands now, "...you humble me Lord."

Anger and Carol

On a pleasant October morning, I am listening to Christmas carols. Not because I wish for the hastening of the Christmas season, but because the CD is the only harp music I have at my office and I needed something peaceful. My heart made a wonderful discovery today. Christmas music is good for relieving anger. At age forty-three, I discovered an emotion I never wanted to discover; that is until I came to the realization that anger is an important emotion in recognizing when something is wrong.

Anger happens when an injustice occurs against oneself or against another. This is a defense mechanism for the psyche and body. After having people attack my spirit, I realize anger can also be a defense for the soul. The problem I've been facing is that after having been so out of touch with the emotion I am making up for the emotion being suppressed. I get angry about everything. My heart feels like a furnace hot with coals. The anger occurs right now at just about anything.

Now that I am in touch with this important emotion, I can also see that I do not have proper or healthy ways to deal with the emotion. It certainly is not healthy to push it down, that is what I have done for all these years and all that has done for me is to make me a proper doormat for other angry, aggressive people and that doormat in recent years added a "Welcome" sign to thieves and liars. I don't want that kind of life. I also don't want to be one of those people who are in constant battle with those people and objects around them.

I also discovered why I tried to suppress this emotion for so long. It feels really rotten. I know I have to find a way to deal with this so that I am not battering strangers' cars with mine, or being fired from my day job for insubordination. I tried the destructiveness once and found that action did not relieve my anger at all. Destruction only crushed a perfectly good watch that I now wish I still had.

I've been walking, meditating, doing yoga, journaling, praying. Don't get me wrong. I believe in God and have begged God to fix me, get me out of this mess. I'm not asking for head bashed on rocks like the Psalmist but I need help! God continues to love me enough to let me find my own way no matter how annoying it is. The trials are important lessons I'm sure, but until now, they have only been a way of corralling the wild horses raging to be free and stomp anything in the path of the rampaging herd. Today, quite by accident, I found

Christmas carols pulling the anger out of me like a magical spirit.

I have spent most of my life in the church and so Christmas carols have memories that twinkle in the darkness of my psyche like the lights we use to adorn trees and houses. Growing up, the Baptist church we attended as a family always had a group that went caroling to sing for the homebound and sick. Then at Christmas, both sides of the family gathered around the piano to sing Christmas carols (although the Poplins sang more than the Whitleys). Years of being a choir director in various denominations taught me more carols with beautiful words singing of hope born in darkness. God being born to our humanity. Wealth of life being born to the poor. Kindness born into the heart of a cold, dark world that had no place for a baby, and yet, God was born anyway.

I can see why the carols help today. Even though the music I am hearing has no words the harp music not only reminds me of the good news I have known throughout my life; the harp music sings a new message to me. In my hard, cold, hurting heart: in the midst of my anger and fear, God dwells. Each day I allow it, God is born into the darkness of my world. “Hark the herald angels sing, Glory to the new born king. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled...” I am hurt and angry and it feels horrendous but a child of peace and hope is born this day, not in a stable but in me. “Hark how the bells, sweet silver bells all seem to say, throw cares away...”

Blues

I guess the trouble started when I decided to sing the blues. Not just sing the tune and the words but also really sing the blues with the soul and feeling I heard from Sippy Wallace or Bonnie Raitt. I listened to the singers of the Mississippi Delta Blues and knew I could do the musical aspect and memorize the words. However, when I sang the same tunes, I could tell they were singing from a different place than me. Unwittingly I sent out a little prayer that I might know what they were really singing about and from where that sound, that soulfulness originated. I've said it before. You have to watch out about prayer. Sometimes dangerous prayers are answered.

My life for the past few years has been about learning to sing the blues, not as a musical exercise but as an experience of the soul, for the blues are born in suffering. The blues come out of the pain and turmoil of life and seek their voice in wailing and moaning. The instruments moan, the singers wail. Even something as positive as love can be painful. Death certainly is painful. The blues come out of decisions gone awry and good intentions that pave the road to hell. Lost cows (yes there is a blues song about a poor person losing her one milk cow), lost love, lost jobs, the blues are about pain and loss.

In a way, Lent is the time the church sings the blues. The songs are mournful and sad. The colors are drab and lifeless. The scriptures speak of suffering. We sing the pain of Jesus, the pain of our humanity and we weep through our song. Sometimes Lent is a difficult season to endure because life is full of pain and don't we come to church for comfort and relief? Here's what I've learned about the blues: sometimes it's good to weep and wail and moan. The emotional thrashing does not necessarily solve the situation but it acknowledges the deep pain of existence and the sometime helpless feelings of life. To sing those songs together is to acknowledge that none of us is alone in our suffering. To focus on the life and suffering of Jesus is to acknowledge that our God is one with us in the pain of our humanity. I must repeat myself and remind you that to know that truth doesn't necessarily make trials better but it can make our pain and grief bearable until we get to the next day, until the pain begins to subside, until the darkness passes and light peeks on the horizon. Until resurrection comes for us.

Don't Leave Me God

Please don't leave stay with me for a while till this night is over till the day returns.

Desolation breathes through my being as dreams rise from the dead.

You have seen me die, wait and see me live.

See me share this life with you. Feel me wrap you in love. Hear me sing my songs

and love you in the singing.

Please don't leave.

Stay a while longer. Till the night is over and I return to love you again.

Where Are You?

My heart is sad, my soul weary. I lost the path I know. Streams laugh at my folly as I drown in my tears. Where are you now O God? God alone I seek, I long for God alone. Where are you now my path and my God?

Pslam 121(NRSV) Assurance of God's Protection

A Song of Ascents

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills from where will my help come?
- 2 My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
- 4 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
- 5 The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
- 6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
- 7 The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
- 8 The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore.

Gender Bender

I'll forewarn you I am on a soapbox about gender identity. All my life I have faced scorn because I don't wear dresses and tons of makeup. I'm not prissy yet I love being a woman. Now that I'm moving more freely in the gay and lesbian community, there is more freedom, but still bias. Am I butch or am I femme? I hate that. Why does it matter if I am a kind and loving person? I am Robin. At this moment I feel totally femme (not Barbie mind you), but full of my feminine self. I love my feminine yet rich voice. I love the curves of my body. Since I have so much to do tomorrow, I may be more into my masculine side. Why is it an issue for us to be one way or another? A man is a better man when he is comfortable with his feminine side and a woman a better woman when she is comfortable with her masculine self. Men need tenderness to reach out in love. Women need strength to protect. Must our lives and viewpoint be stuck in the mud of social mores which box in the vast beauty and uniqueness of each person?

What would happen if we became people freed to go with the flow of masculine and feminine energy? When we are fluid, life is richer and stronger without fear of being. A river is both masculine and feminine; water flowing from a source moving strongly and forcefully over rocks and land, but flowing into the vastness of the ocean. The river is nurturing, giving life to those nearby but when out of balance, the river is destructive (with nature's understanding of recreation/renewal coming after destruction). In nature, the masculine and feminine go hand in hand without judgment or bias.

I am more than my gender. Aren't you?

Another Day

Another day rises, the darkness of the night still lingers and I remember the idiom, “Sometimes it’s darkest before the dawn.” That would explain many things. How one moment I can be so full of hope and renewal that it seems all things are coming into the good, into the light of day. I can see the hope before my eyes and almost touch the light, the goodness. However, in the blink of an eye, I see that I am still on the edge of the night trying to escape the darkness that has stalked me in recent years.

Perhaps the darkness is not so much a stalker and that’s my lesson to learn. Bad things can happen in the darkness and sometimes darkness is chosen in order to conceal the damage. The problem is that bad things happen in the day too. Some thieves are so brazen they rob you while you’re watching. Of course, somehow they know you won’t see, for whatever reason. Sometimes they know you are just too afraid.

Darkness fades into daylight and daylight into darkness and makes one entire day, light fading in and fading out, constant and eternal. Darkness fading in and fading out, another eternal constant. A truth lingers in this mystery deep without our souls. Let it go. Let it be. All things shall be well. All things shall be well.

The Healing Window

I first sat in the pew at St. Peter's healing window about a month ago. The window is near the back of the church and I only sit at the back of the church when I come in late. I'm not sure what made me look at the window because I don't look at the windows when I come into worship. The windows are merely part of the setting of my church, St. Peter's Episcopal. That first morning, however, I looked to my right and saw Jesus healing and said to myself, "this is good, I want healing," then turned to the service at hand.

The sermon began and we were sitting. I soon felt a chill and wrapped my arms around myself for warmth. As my hand touched the left arm of my jacket, I felt something on my jacket. I pulled the object off and was embarrassed to find that it was the sticky seeds of a weed. I knew immediately that the seeds on the jacket remained from the time when we had to hunt wood when we lived in the wilderness. I was embarrassed again. I thought I had washed the coat and here I was in church with weeds from the wilderness on my coat. Then I thought of how much I needed to let go of the wilderness pain in me and remembered I was sitting on the pew with the healing window. I decided that I would get the seeds off the arm of my jacket and leave them on the floor there. While I knew it was not the most hospitable thing to do, I knew that I must shed that pain, and what better place than in my beloved church at the healing window. I knew it was a mere act of will hoping that I would be moved to healing because I needed and wanted healing so badly. I listened to the sermon while pulling seeds of the wilderness from my jacket. There was no great transformation happening, but at least I was letting go of the burden, letting go of some of the pain, making an effort towards healing and restoration of my soul, even if it was only to remove seeds that reminded me of the pain.

We entered into communion that is always beautiful and powerful. As my turn came and I approached the altar I could see that I was going to be kneeling with my back to the congregation. I was flooded with embarrassment because I knew that the hole in my shoe was quite visible because the shoe was cracked across the width.

I remembered the first time I came to St. Peter's at the beginning of my wilderness experience I had a hole in a different shoe and so I remembered no one at St. Peter's would judge me. Bread in my hand, wine touching my lips God touches me. As I returned to my seat, the grace of it all touched me. I knelt to

pray and the embarrassment of the morning flooded over me. I couldn't believe that I had worn the shoes with the most visible and obvious hole in them. Then I had the audacity to drop seeds from the dark woods of my wilderness on the floor of my beautiful church.

Then I remembered an email I had sent to my mentor when I was a pastor in training and I was embarrassed because I had fallen apart. I had shown him in my email my vulnerability and the pain I just couldn't seem to bear and in the email practically begged him not to think less of me. I prayed at that moment to God out of my frailty, weakness and embarrassment. I do not remember the exact words of my prayer, only my humiliation in the presence of God and the congregation of St. Peter's. Bread in my body, wine swirling warm around my heart, I heard the whisper of God speak to me, "You are exactly as I made you to be, a human with limitations. Everything is okay, I love you." I cried and I cried, trying not to sob aloud at the beauty of God's love and scare my neighbors further. I went home that day and I forgot about the healing window but not the experience.

Yesterday morning, I awakened and could not go back to sleep so I prayed. I prayed about how to proceed in my life journey and how to help my partner who is in pain. I don't know what to do because it feels like my pain furthers hers and vice versa and all it does is promote anger for us both. I prayed because I want to be active in church again and part of my partner's pain is with the church. I prayed until I could lie back down with the hope of sleep.

Another day to go to church, many things conspired to make me late to the service. Rather than say anything, I let the love and the peace of the morning stay present. If I missed the first hymn, what would it matter? I would go earlier next Sunday. We arrived at the church and much to my surprise the service started late and the introduction to the first hymn was just starting. I quickly tried to find the seat at the front, but as I approached the lectern side, the pews were full for the baptisms of the day so I started towards the back until I could find a place not filled with people or blocked from view by the pillars of the church. Finally, there was an open place and the pew was full of sunlight.

As I entered the pew, I saw my friends, Elizabeth and Michael from Taize prayer. These lovely people are dear to me in so many ways, but also, Elizabeth sponsored me when I became a member at St. Peter's. My heart filled with joy. As I opened my hymn, I did an odd thing, turned to my right and looked to see the window and once again, I was in the healing pew. I felt God wanted me to remember my last experience because I was wearing the same coat that had been washed with every seed removed and I was wearing a new pair of Wal-Mart shoes. There is still healing to be done in my life but perhaps I would not be so

embarrassed by it on this day.

As the service proceeded, I remembered my conversation with Beth at Taize on the previous Wednesday and remembered that I felt God was exhorting me to review the vows of my ordination. I remembered Tom speaking to me encouraging me to return to ministry at Taize on Wednesday. I told him that I was working on healing further before discerning where God was leading and that I had to work through things with my partner. We had some serious problems. As I remembered these things, I wondered what God had to say to me today in the service. I forgot about the healing window.

Sitting there reflecting in the peace of the morning, my heart spoke to God about how I knew and accepted my call to prayer. At the same time I argued with God, there had to be another way to serve outside of the institution of the church. Just show me the way God. The service continued, Father Scott preached, and in talking about the vows of Baptism, the Spirit exhorted again to review the vows of my ordination. I took them seriously when I spoke them and while I cannot remember them exactly by word, I know that in the past few years I have not lived them.

It saddened me to think of it because of how I love God and wish to serve God. At the same time, I did not want to hurt my partner's view of the church any further by choosing the church over a relationship with her. My heart and soul hurts because I do not know what to do and I said as much in my conversation with God. I sit in the pew of the healing window having a conversation with God. Anamnesis is the word, "...remembering, remembering who I am and whose I am." That is all I think. I am remembering.

Communion calls us to another act of remembering. As I approach the altar, I reach for the baptismal water and quickly place it on my head getting more water on my hand and my head than intended. I do not have time to blot the large drop of water on my head before the priest is to stand before me giving me the bread of life. I quickly kneel with the soles of my new shoes exposed to the congregation, but my attention focused only on the communion and that drop of baptismal water on my forehead. The priest puts the bread of God in my hand and lingers a moment as if in blessing. I take the bread and as I bend my head to take the bread into my mouth, the drop of water slowly runs down my head and I hear the words of the priest speak, "the body of Christ broken for you." With my head bowed and as the water moves on my forehead I hear the Spirit say to me, "the tears of God shed for you" and it is all I can do to hold back the sobs.

If I love my partner so much and cry on her forehead for her pain and out of love for her, how much more does God love me? The cupbearer comes to me and my eyes are filled with tears as my mind's eye feels the kiss of God on my

forehead. I remember, “Marked with the cross of Christ forever.” The cupbearer can see my tears and I can see his compassion. I take the cup and drink it in, “the blood of Christ shed for you” and I am overwhelmed with the love of God. I can hear and feel God’s compassion for me; love so present I can taste it in my mouth, feel the liquor of it swirling in my throat, feel the weight of it touching me through the bread. I kneel back in my pew at the healing window, in the sunlight and let the tears of God melt in with my tears.

The service ended with my eyes full of tears and my heart full of hope. I left in the sunlight of the day with the window of healing behind me at St. Peters. Then as I rode home, I hear a song of someone asking a love to come home and I hear God speaking to me, asking me the prodigal to come home. I feel God's great love and I want to come home, but don't know how, but at least there is a window of healing, not only at my church but now in my heart and in time, I will know the way. At least now, there is a window.

My Sister

My sister, raging mother:
Mother of mine before she was a mother.
My sister, confidante:
Sharer of secrets before her children were born.
My sister, strong,
small of body, but strong of spirit.
My sister, faithful:
Devoted to family and the love of God.
My sister,
is a small woman
with a great heart.
My sister,
Bearer of things unknown to even her.

Prayer to the Hound of Heaven

I cannot now remember the writer's name, but some famous Christian writer called God the, "hound of heaven." While I understood the writer's intention, I was concerned about the implications of this metaphor since hounds are used for killing. Even though my dad was not a hunter, I knew hounds were used to track prey, corner or tree the prey and hold the animal hostage until the hunter came to shoot and kill the cornered creature. Hounds were used to hunt down escaped slaves and find hidden Indians. Then add to that the knowledge that the Psalms talk of God shooting at our hearts and now I can see my view of God has been based in fear; fear of God's destruction of me. I was caught by God once and the church hurt me so I ran and I ran away hard and fast. I was sure it was time for the killing.

Now I am hunted again. I can hear the footprints in the darkness behind me. God is after me again and while I am still on the run, I am tired and to the point where I want God to catch me, even if it is for the killing. Yet, here is what I am discovering about the hound of heaven. This hound can sniff you out in the darkest of nights. This hound will track you through the deepest parts of the woods and through the most tangled thickets. This hound is determined to hunt you even if it means traveling thousands of miles and takes several years to find you. This hound never tires and never gives up. This hound is not afraid of anything you may say or do and when you are cornered or up a tree the eyes of the hound stare at you steadily and as God reaches to catch you, it is not for the killing. I was cornered yesterday at church and unexpectedly God caught me, wrapped loving arms around me, and told me I was loved. I cried and I cried because I am tired of running and tired of being afraid, but in the end, I ran again though not as fast. I am still afraid. Trust comes slowly sometimes.

I was not thinking of the hound when I borrowed a disc of music from the public library yesterday. The disc was only of piano music I thought. Piano music has been one type of music that soothes the pain of my soul. I wanted some new piano music to soothe the pain. I had heard the pianist, Jim Brickman, on national public radio and wanted to see if the entire disc was good. The man is known for his piano music and yet as I listened this morning I heard a woman's voice suddenly singing to me a love song that is not a romantic song but written almost verbatim from 1 Corinthians 13. Then the singer adds in these other words,

“...I promise you, my love will never fail and I will give to you, faith hope and love. Love never fails, never fails. I promise you my love will never fail. And I will give to you, faith hope and love but the greatest of these is love.”

Tears well up in my eyes. I am sitting at work in the second story of an office set ready to work on accounting and I hear the hound of heaven howling at my window; howling a song of love aimed straight at my heart, straight at my fear. The hound of heaven is after me again and I want to be caught. This time I want the hound of heaven to track me down for good. Catch me if you can. I want to be caught.

Once More

Once more I do this
dance of madness,
sad breaking heart wallowing
in rejection
as I choose yet another
who chooses not me.
The lies, the lies
why were they necessary?
If you told me you loved me,
why couldn't it
be true rather than some cruel memory
tying me to you?

Some Women Are Crazy

They don't tell you this when you get your "How to Be a Lesbian" manual, so I'm tellin' you now. Some women are crazy. Not just the straight white trash women who will cut you, but lesbians can be crazy too. If the woman ain't sure she's a lesbian, but wanting to try it on for size, you might ask her history, how many men she's had and why she's givin' up on 'em. Yeah, sometimes they give up on men because they were lesbians all along but sometimes, the women are so coon crazy that not even a man will keep her, but only hold on for a quickie.

Her name was typical (so I'm going to call her Red) and she had hair fiery red. I never liked redheads before so I was surprised she caught my eye. I shoulda known she caught my partner's wandering eye first, but Jeannie hated kids and Red had two of them so I was pretty sure Jeannie would want nothing to do with Red. The first day I saw her, she had on a professional business suit and legs that would catch anyone's eye. When she got in the car, we hit it off and I was able to talk to Red like no one before. Jeannie was so absorbed in Jeannie's world, well, how could I not see this thing happening before my eyes, that the only reason Jeannie would befriend another was to bed that person.

Dang it, it's hard to admit I was so crazy myself for dating someone much younger than me. I thought that maybe if I dated someone younger, I would meet someone less crazy and with less baggage. Baggage starts early, so all it meant for me was that I was with a young woman with many problems who was also immature. During those years, I learned that young women are not my thing. Heartbreak and misery are odd companions. My eyes could see that Jeannie was a sexy young woman, but she was too dang young and even as I write this my stomach turns to think I ever considered even dating her, much less living with her.

I started dating Jeannie after getting rid of a psychopath who had threatened me with a gun. The stress of it all, the abuse, and the bankruptcy seemed to pave the way for a different life. I was going to start anew, start over and learn what it is really like to live my lesbian life. I sold the house, the bedroom furniture, everything but my guitar, piano and dog and moved out West to start a new life with this youngun'. She said it was what she wanted. She lived with me a few months and life was hard in the city for everybody. The wide open plains country would do us good right?

Never take a wounded person to her psychological mine field (a.k.a. home).

The bad got worse and ugly. Yeah the western sunsets and sunrises color the sky fire and pink, a heavenly dome, but desolation lays waste to the days and nights stalk and tremor full of dark strangers. Suicidal threats, loss of job after job, snow storms, the death of my best dog. I had to get the hell out of that place before I went insane. Jeannie had threatened me that if I ever talked about moving back to North Carolina that we were done. I was ready to be done with her and her sexual fantasies that wanted me to be a man while I wanted her to be an adult. I didn't expect her to return with me. I sold my piano, my books, and my sound system, packed up a new dog, my writing and wondered what to do next.

I was surprised when she chose to return with me to Charlotte. After a month, we were one day away from being homeless and my mom and dad stepped in to save the day. Her family would let her rot. I had watched it when I was out West. Neglect and abuse as prevalent as the sandy red soil, but my southern Baptist conservative parents were not going to let me suffer and if it meant saving that little ne'er do well, then so be it. That's the only thing I think Jeannie gave me, my own parents. She began talking about a woman at work, there was always someone she had her eye on and I hoped this time she would just move in with the woman and leave me the heck alone. Why didn't I get rid of her? Sad to say I felt sorry for her and didn't want to betray someone who had known nothing but betrayal. I didn't figure she would last two more years. She threatened to leave me on a daily basis and finally I started telling her, "Then go."

Red came along while Jeannie was flirting with another chick in her office. Red worked with them too. At the time I thought, Jeannie going out with the other chick could only be a sure thing since they were the same age and hungry for each other. I needed a friend and Red began to talk to me and counsel me. We became friends and I was ready for Jeannie to leave. Ready to be done with her and her constant telling me how awful I was, and how some woman who she never dated was the best thing that ever happened to her. The other chick was just the ticket for Jeannie and I knew it. One night, she came home at three in the morning smelling of the chick's loud perfume, I knew the scent because I had met the woman; had stood behind her in the lunch line or the breakfast line at work smelling that same perfume. I prayed the end was near, but at the same time, I was pissed. Jeannie had accused me of infidelity so many times and not once had I been unfaithful.

I began to confide in Red and talk about the problems I had with Jeannie and all the struggles we had had from the beginning. During this time, Red started flirting with me, saying, "You don't get nothin' if you don't ask nothing," and

she was my age. She was alive when Nixon was president and knew who he was. There was chemistry between us. She began to email me with sexy notes and all that hidden sexual passion that I didn't feel for Jeannie fired up inside of me. I flirted back. Sexy emails spiced the day, and Jeannie none the wiser. Not that she trusted me, but she was having a tryst. I knew it, had smelled it on her clothes. I hoped it would not be long before she was truly gone, but I didn't know how to ask her to leave. Oddly enough, I didn't want to cause that hurt of rejection, but I did not want to be hurt any more. How much pain can one person carry? I was near the end of my ability to bear pain.

Easter day, Jeannie told me she needed to talk to me and finally I knew the confession that she would be leaving me for the chick. The thing with the chick had been going on for months so imagine my surprise when she told me she and Red wanted to be together. What? What are you talking about? She wanted to break up with me, but keep living with me paying the bills while she dated Red. I didn't cuss then. It was a matter of principle or maybe I said hell, but hell was a place then, not a curse.

Paranoid Door

You stare at a hallucination created from your past, created from paranoia. The irony is that the door is a hallucination you associate with me. You sit at the door you see watch it carefully; making sure I don't go through the door I can't even see.

I don't see that door because it is not part of my being or experience. You question, interrogate me to see if I've been near the door, or if it looks ajar to you, did I open it? I keep saying there is not a door there for me making you question me more.

You say, "If there is not a door there how can I say there is not one?" Frustration binds me because your paranoia blinds you to love that is before you; to the goodness of each day. You're too busy watching a door that is not there... you watch your paranoia watching you. I'm tired of being punished for a door that isn't there. I love you, but if you accuse me one more time of something I will never do of something I have never considered; I will walk out the front door, the real door, the one that belongs to me.

Smoking

Never thought the smell of cigarette smoke would make my mouth water. It's not what you think either. Not nicotine for me Or oral stimulation from Putting it in my mouth. I don't need a cigarette to think through a problem or calm Down From nerve wrecking events. No it's not the cigarette I lust for but the woman who smoked it... and smoked in my arms In the bushes In the car In my bed Where ever we could touch. Whenever our eyes met.

Later she smoked my wallet. Torched my heart, but all I can think of now when I smell cigarette smoke is the ashy taste of her mouth the fire in her fingers the blaze between our bodies. The smell of smoke.

Your Anger

You sling anger around like rain. Torrential downpours flood the earth. You think the earth needs water and you need to let the sky of your pain pour out. What you don't realize is that your anger hurts. Your anger wounds like hail, stabs like knives and the only thing flooding the earth is the blood of my wounded heart puddling round my feet.

My Last Apology

This is my last apology. The only reason I offer this is because I know I will make mistakes. I'm human. Mistakes happen. Sure, if one of my mistakes harms you and an apology is appropriate, I will humbly repent.

However, no longer will I apologize for my existence. I won't apologize for the fact that I believe or look different than you. When my feelings are stronger or weaker than yours there is no reason to apologize. They are MY feelings. When I don't react like you want, or speak like you want, forget an apology. It ain't happenin'. Here's the main way I WILL NEVER EVER APOLOGIZE AGAIN. I hope you hear the shout in my writing, the anger in my heart. I will never ever again apologize to YOU because you have hurt ME.

To Think I Once Loved You

Now you seek revenge;
a vendetta for loving you.
No matter how many times I ask
“why?”

How can I understand
this need for you to crucify me,
nail me to a cross
for the sheer pleasure
of seeing me suffer not die.

Becoming Joy

When I was first pregnant with myself I had a craving for mayonnaise, (Duke's mayo of course since I'm southern), toast with apple butter slathered on top. Of course, this odd treat started out as an improvisation based upon the fact that I had moved into a new apartment, was short on money and had to make my last five bucks go as far as possible before the next payday. On a Sunday, it felt like God was finally explaining what and why I had endured the last seven years of hell with partners verging on the edge of insanity. To make matters worse God, angels, the Great Divine, some being larger than me intervened in another relationship mistake right as I was leaving Jeannie. Of course, the jury is out for me if the Divine "saved" me from Red or if I merely had one more lesson the universe wanted to teach me for good measure.

Though my heart is broken, my bank account bare again and my living space empty enough to echo, I know the answer to the one test I've failed in the past seven years when it comes to relationships. The question was, "What is my purpose in life?" I've found hundreds of wrong answers, yet each of them the same mistake. The purpose of life is not to help others, rescue others, please only others, make others happy at your own expense, (physically, emotionally, spiritually, and financially), or to save the world. The purpose is to save yourself.

Road To Bethel

Sometimes God Whispers

There was a battle happening inside of me for so long. Trying to find love in God, but also another human being who would love me and accept my love. I made crazy choices. After the last crazy person I allowed in my life I told my counselor I would do anything, any therapy, any work needed to be done in order not to repeat another bad, failed relationship. At the time, Red had been flirting ferociously with me. Some part of me knew she was using me, another part of me thought we “clicked.” There was a new thing with her. I could fight with her. Sounds silly doesn’t it that after all the years of life that it wasn’t until I was forty-five that I realized healthy couples can and do fight. They just fight fair for the most part. I won’t say that the redhead fought fair, because she was a little psychotic as well, but somehow when we fought I was able to shake off the crazy things she said. I didn’t let them sink into my soul. She had kids and I loved her kids and her parents. We could have a nice happy little family, I thought.

My friends and my sister kept telling me, “Robin, she’s just using you.” I knew they were right, but at the same time, I didn’t know how to find and keep a healthy relationship. Bars were not the place I wanted to go, much less hang out and meet someone. After all the years and struggles, I was still a church person. How many lesbians go to church? Well, lots of them and most of the church goers are already happily involved with loving partners of fifteen or more years. Those people were my heroes, a vision of what could be for me too. The redhead went to church with me a time or two and her daughter loved going to church with me. I thought this meant something. The thing different from others is that the redhead kept using me and the church visit as a way to keep me hoping so that I could be used.

My counselor worked with me about why I continued to allow her to use me. We had chemistry. The type of chemistry that made sparks fly. She would do things that would convince me I was not seeing her again. I didn’t care how smooth she talked or how kind she seemed. I knew that if we got into the same room we would be all over each other and passion would take over reason. Then, when her usual tactics failed she would email me and tell me her son missed me. He was autistic and I was his friend. I would go see him and the drama would start all over. A co-worker called her a “drama mama” and no truer words could ever be said. I kept holding onto hope of a family.

One morning, as I got ready for work, out of the blue I heard this whispered in my mind, "There's someone better for you." Kinda weird even for me. It made me stop and look around the bedroom, ask God what was going on, as well as say a little prayer for my own sanity. Everything was like normal for that time. Car doors slamming as people got into cars for work. My black cat staring at me wondering why I ironed every day while the dog pouted on the couch that I was leaving again. Then, on the way to work, I heard the whisper again. "There's someone better for you." This time I yelled in my car, "LIKE WHO?"

I had always wanted someone who would be my best friend, my spiritual soul mate and my partner. A lot to ask for and sadly, a lot of my failed relationships happened because no one lived up to the ideal I held in my mind. There was always something missing. Lack of communication, unwillingness to participate in the life of faith, giving me a hard time because it was important to me to go to church, always something that didn't fit. The few partners I thought I could live with for all of my life left me either for another sexier, wilder lover or because I wanted to be open and honest AND still be Christian. God knew all of this of course and it ticked me off that I had never heard this message before, just had an idea of a super person I would one day meet. I was sure it wasn't happening in this lifetime. I yelled one more time, "Who is this person and just HOW am I supposed to find her?" There was no answer. Only silence and while I didn't hear the whisper again, I could feel it echoing in my soul and can still feel it to this day. The strength of that message however was the impetus that I needed to do the right thing and break all contact with Red.

Weeks went by and Red tried making contact but I kept to my word and oddly started feeling better about life and peaceful, though I still doubted where I would meet anyone right for me. I had met some nice women, they made me laugh, we could talk about God and were caring, but the person either wanted to party all the time or talk all the time. All that happened is I got angry at God for making me so weird. While able to be sociable and handle social settings gracefully, I do not thrive in those settings. My soul craves solitude, quiet and peaceful activity. I love to hike, but I hike for the conversation with nature and God in nature, not for the exercise. Walking was time for prayer and thinking. I had long ago given up television and my health challenges did not allow for excessive partying (again I was never a party person though). I had the heart of a hermit. Who could live with that? Who would put up with that? I began to accept that my life would be one of a secular hermit.

A bunch of friends had started a dinner group that met once a month. It was a gathering for professional women to meet and support each other. The goal of the dinners was to build community and a support system for each other and for

others who might want stable friends with values. Someone from the dinner group asked me to teach a Bible Study for women at Charlotte's Gay and Lesbian center. The study ended up being a beautiful way to talk about the challenges of being a lesbian Christian. Most of the women in the group had the same challenges as I, feeling that we weren't accepted by the Christian community, but the GLBT community wasn't thrilled about our commitment to the church either. The first study we spent talking about how odd it felt that all of us were bringing Bibles into the community center. After that, our group focused on how scripture informed and gave value to our daily lives. Soon, a trans male to female joined us, glad to find a place where she could make her transition and still learn about God, talk about her faith, be with women of faith who would not judge her. While all of these women were exceptional, we were all devoted at the time to healing from past relationships or wanting to get ourselves on more solid footing spiritually. We were all learning what it meant to love God and love the self and the neighbor. The group was beautiful and we grew in friendship and care for one another.

The statement that sounded like promise, "there's someone better for you," began to haunt me. How could I find that person when my world was so limited? I went to work and the Bible study. Once a month I went to the dinner group. I was also afraid of repeating the same mistakes. How could I ever meet anyone and be able to trust the person, who made the world seem even smaller. At one of the dinner groups a woman told me about an online network where she made friends. She didn't seem like a player and said that she did actually make friends there. I had met my ex online and that was a disaster so I was not interested in finding a sweetheart, but I did want more lesbian friends. It didn't take long to see that there were many online like me. Not just that we were lesbians, but you don't know who to trust.

The online world is no less dangerous for a woman just because she is a lesbian. The site was like others where you post a photo and what you want out of life or a partner. On my profile, I was clear that I wanted friendship only, that I was a former pastor. I couldn't believe the things that people would put on the profile, but I've always been tame. For some reason, no one chose to write me out of all those people online. I attempted a few conversations with the people who had spiritual posts and they would kindly respond, but no friendships. I knew the "former pastor" issue scared them. It was okay. I wanted to scare away anybody who couldn't deal with my life.

I soon began using the site as a way to learn more about the lesbian lifestyle that so many religious people claim belongs to us all. Having been a church person all my life, I identified with church people, not the lesbian community. I

began to read more of the profiles just to learn about the people online. I knew that I didn't care for the lesbian magazines because they often focused on sex which was not all of my life, nor was it the focus of my life. There was a photo that kept catching my attention but she had chosen, "MoonRabbit," as her name and it made me wary. Red had been in love with the moon and was sexed like a rabbit. After reading the other profiles, I was sure that this one was probably one of those sex oriented profiles and I wanted to focus on the ones that were real and/or focused on spirituality. It seemed for a time that the picture almost glowed and one day, just to prove that I was right, I decided what would it hurt to look at the profile?

Imagine my surprise when I read the most well composed, well written paragraph basically saying, if you aren't interested in intelligence and spirit don't bother contacting me. It was a wonderful paragraph. Done tactfully, but anyone with any sense at all would know that MoonRabbit was drawing a clear boundary of, "Don't Mess with Me." I was so enthused over the writing of the paragraph that I wrote back with a subject line of, "Wonderful," and proceeded to rejoice over the exquisite writing. I was careful to mention that I only wrote to say I loved the writing. I might have mentioned that I was a writer too, and a former pastor for sure, just wanted to say that I liked the writing. Good luck, see you later. I had no intention of writing the person again and figured she wouldn't write me anyway because, well, she was gorgeous and I'm just plain. I was sure she was out of my league.

MoonRabbit writes back saying she held a special place in her heart for pastors since her dad was a Methodist preacher. She had gone to my MySpace and read my poetry. We began to talk about writing. I learned that her name was DJ. and that three years earlier she had lost her beloved partner to cancer. I talked about my loss of my pastorate and how it was a death for me. Soon we traded emails, but we were both clear that we weren't interested in anything but a writing friendship and also someone to talk about the pain and loss of a loved one and a loved vocation. She was writing a book about losing a partner to cancer and I was writing this memoir. We wrote about loss and life. We talked about great books and poetry. We quickly became friends. We talked about God and spirit, about the church and where God was in all of the loss and pain of life.

At my St. Patrick's Day party my friends learned that I had a new online friend and of course were giving all types of warning, but there was no need to worry I told them. Both of us were clear that we were just friends. I had learned a hard lesson in meeting my ex and that there was no way I was going to rush into any kind of relationship, much less an online relationship. DJ and I talked every day online and usually, we were talking about the healing process and how

God helped us through the years of pain and loss. We talked about wondering why God allowed things to happen like they do, but we also knew that there were no answers. I wanted this friendship, one where I could talk so freely about God and be an open lesbian too. DJ's friendship became dear to me. We both continued to confirm that we were just friends and that the friendship was good. The friendship was bringing healing to us both and we were mutual in our agreement that God had been a part of our paths crossing at such an odd time. She had only gotten online trying to find an acquaintance and it was during that week I had emailed her. Neither of us had returned to that social website again.

The more I learned about DJ, the more I cared about her. I wanted to be her good friend above all else. I knew I had to be careful, my heart is one that so easily falls in love. The more I talked to her it was clear to me however that I wanted nothing to destroy our friendship. We never discussed anything other than friendship. It's just that I had remembered that whispered message, "there's someone better for you." I was positive that DJ's presence in my life was merely God's way of giving me hope for a good thing one day— with someone else. DJ and I were friends and we both meant to remain good friends. We had each other's telephone numbers, but we had never spoken on the phone. I finally had a friend who understood my love of God and ministry as well as the depth of loss. She finally had someone who understood that grief doesn't end just because a year or two has passed.

Some of the friends from the St. Patrick's party had decided to meet a month later at a coffeehouse where an acoustic guitarist was performing. The coffee shop was in the neighborhood for many of us and it was our way of seeking to strengthen that community of stability and respect. The women who were going to the small concert were all longtime companions...except for me. It was okay with me however, I wanted to be around these longtime partners to learn how they related to one another; to hope some of that relationship goodness would become part of my life too. I got online to check the time of the concert at the coffee shop from an email. In my inbox was a message from DJ. She wanted to meet me in person at Malaprops Bookstore Cafe, a wonderful place in Asheville. I quickly wrote back and said, "No." I didn't want to take a chance and meet her. Her friendship was too valuable to risk anything else. All I remember saying is, "No I can't come." I might have even said, "No I won't come." I didn't explain, just got the time of the musician's performance and then prepared to meet my friends at the coffee shop.

DJ's email had made me nervous so I decided to go to the coffee shop early. I didn't want to risk getting online and making a decision that would risk the great friendship we had. At the same time, my heart raced at the thought of being able

to meet this person face to face. No. That was not smart, I kept telling myself as I drove away from my apartment. If I meet her, I might fall in love and that would not be good. The coffee shop was located in the Quail Hollow Shopping Center. I was so early I sat in my car waiting for a time in the parking lot. Soon I could see that the singer had begun so thought I would make my way and listen alone until everyone else arrived.

As I got in line for a cappuccino, the acoustic guitar and mellow woman's voice was as soothing as the smell of the fresh coffee. I fumbled around for my wallet in my jacket. It wasn't there and all of my pants pockets had no wallet either. I began to panic because losing your wallet is never fun, but in a city it can be even more of a loss. As I walked out the door of the coffee shop, the singer began singing of all things in a city, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound...." My wallet was not in my car so I raced to my apartment remembering the scene of the woman singing a hymn in a Charlotte coffee shop and wondered, "What if God wanted me to meet DJ face to face?" What was wrong with meeting a Christian friend after all? I decided that if DJ ever asked me again I would go meet her to chat. "Amazing Grace." I'm sure it would be okay.

When I did not find my wallet at the apartment, I fully panicked. As I decided to run to the office to see if by chance my wallet had fallen out of my pocket at my desk, the phone rang. It's rare that I will answer the phone when I'm busy. I thought it was my friends at the coffee shop and I wanted to tell them why I wasn't there. When I answered however, the voice was unfamiliar, the caller soon identified herself and it was DJ. I immediately launched into the story about losing my wallet and asked her to pray that I find it. We chatted just a bit and I apologized for being distracted. She asked if I would reconsider meeting her at Malaprops. I told her I would but that if I didn't find my wallet I wasn't going anywhere, "I really need to run to the office to check."

She understood and before she said goodbye, she said one more thing that stopped me in my tracks, "Robin, be careful."

I hung up the phone in wonder. In all of my life, in all of the dangerous places I had lived, no one had ever told me to be careful. While DJ knew I lived in Charlotte, she did not know the locale of my apartment or my office building. Luckily, my wallet was on my desk and when I got back to the apartment I called and we arranged to meet at the bookstore. I was worried but also a bit excited.

The rest of the evening and the next morning I worried that I was doing the wrong thing, but I also worried that if I didn't go at all, it would be a worse thing. Asheville was two hours from Charlotte and one of my favorite places in the world. The sudden trip to Asheville was of course unplanned and there was no way I could leave my dog, Bear, alone in the apartment for several hours.

Yes, I could call my friends and ask someone to dog sit, but I didn't feel like hearing a lecture nor did I want to be talked out of the trip. I also decided that if things were all wrong when we got to the bookstore I could always use Bear as the reason I needed to leave and get the dog home. It was April and as we approached Asheville we could see a dusting of snow at the higher elevations. I stopped at a rest stop to let Bear have a break and she was excited about the air, the trip and of course all of the smells. The closer I got to Asheville, the more nervous I was as I wondered if I was doing the right thing. At that point, it was too late to turn back.

The drive didn't take as long as I had thought so Bear and I took walks around the streets behind Malaprops. The wind was biting and much chillier and hillier than in the city, though Charlotte isn't that flat either. I knew that with my asthma I needed to get inside the building. I cracked a window so Bear would have a little fresh air. She would be safe and warm on the cushioned back seat. She had her own sleeping bag for travel.

Inside the bookstore, it was extra hot and in my nervousness, I didn't want to be taking a sweater off in front of this new person; who at the same time seemed like I had known her forever. Time for the meeting was drawing near, but I ran to the car to leave the sweater. As I returned to the store, I walked around the corner and saw her in a red coat. I stopped in my tracks. She looked a little different from the one photo I had seen, but I was sure that it was her. She reached for the handle of the door and something in the grace of that moment, the simple act of reaching for the door; I knew that I loved her. At that moment, she turned towards me though I had spoken not a word. She walked towards me with a broad, beautiful smile and we hugged like long lost friends.

We talked for an hour or two until I mentioned needing to give Bear a break from the car. I apologized and said I just want to check on her. DJ was excited to meet Bear and willing to take her for a walk. We continued to talk as we made our way to the car, both of us all smiles and happiness. I opened the door to the car and Bear jumped out greeting DJ like a long lost friend and immediately began performing puppy twirls at her feet. DJ was still laughing when Bear did something she had never done with a stranger—falling at DJ's feet she rolled on her back wallowing on DJ's shoes. We stood there laughing at the dog for a moment and then DJ suggested taking a ride to the Folk Art Center, my other favorite place in the world (though DJ didn't know it at the time). As I started to put Bear back in the car, DJ said, "Oh no, let's take Bear with us." This was a good sign. DJ was a person who was kind to me and kind to my dog. I knew I had to keep my feelings in check, but it was hard. DJ was easy to talk to, my dog loved her and we had most everything in common as well as a love of God.

DJ pulled her SUV up to my car and let Bear in the back seat. Bear could hardly contain her excitement at the new friend and then to smell the rugs where DJ's dogs had been too. DJ was moving higher and higher on Bear's good person scale. I could say the same for me. It was clear from DJ's actions that her way with Bear wasn't just an act to appease or impress me, it was clear she loved dogs. She had told me so before, but others had said the same thing and then their actions spoke of inconvenience and impatience. As we drove away from the bookstore, Bear walked up to put her head between us excited about the next place of adventure. When we arrived at the Folk Art Center, we took Bear for a walk around the grounds. DJ was patient with Bear as she sniffed every blade of grass. We chatted and walked until we were chilled to the bone. Bear wasn't happy when we put her back in the car because she wanted to stay with her new friend, but she would be warm.

The Folk Art Center is filled with art from the artists of the Asheville area and other artists from the Blue Ridge Mountain community. The lower floor is the retail area where carved bowl, hand-woven baskets, pottery, fiber arts and jewelry can be purchased. The upper level is always an exhibit of some type of art that represents the best of folk art. On this day, the exhibit was one of great calligraphers. We were both excited because of our love of art and the written word. Glen Epstein and Barbara Yale-Read were two of the artists out of 63 participating calligraphy artists in the exhibition representing 24 states and 8 foreign countries. The works were beautiful and many of them were creations of calligraphic scriptures. The words danced before our eyes. Unspoken words danced in our hearts as we smiled at each other. We both drank in the beauty of the artworks, but little was spoken, just smiles and appreciation.

Somewhere between Malaprops and the Folk Art Center, I decided I would wait for her if it took forever. I did not tell DJ this, just a secret I whispered to God. As we left the center we walked Bear one more time around the grounds and at one point DJ took my hand and I gasped. I didn't mean to, it was such a girly thing to do and I've never been girly, but that simple gesture took my breath away in surprise and delight.

The daylight was fading into the cold night and I knew Bear and I had a long drive back to the city. We simply had to go back to Charlotte. This was no excuse to get away from DJ, just the reality of a working woman. DJ was kind in her understanding. She took us back to my car and I loaded Bear back into her seat to say my goodbyes to DJ. Then DJ did the oddest thing, as she said goodbye. She reached up, made the sign of the cross on my forehead—an act of blessing done in the liturgical churches. Immediately, my psyche had a breaking away, a shedding of something like darkness, like breaking glass falling away

letting me out of my cage, though I don't know what kind of cage. I was stunned for a second and then leapt into her arms in thankfulness for I knew it was the start of another ealing. I almost knocked her down, my hug was so enthusiastic and I was greatly embarrassed, but at the time, I couldn't tell her what her blessing did. I could tell her a lot of things, but I wasn't brave enough to tell her that just yet. We got into our cars driving our separate ways home and on an impulse I called her. I could no longer resist speaking my heart.

"I don't know how anyone can stay away from you." Neither of us was looking for anything other than friendship, how could we know we would find each other and fall in love? I suddenly was thankful I listened to God's whisper, "There's someone better for you," because again, God was right.

News - September 18, 2006

I sit, watch the news and wonder about our world. What is news today? Young girls killed, abducted. Roads cannot handle bikers, cannot handle the population control, cannot handle the pollution and oversized cars guzzling gas. The solutions? Build bigger roads, cry over our daughters and make bikers find a new route. Woman paid two million dollars to tour in space while people starve; our environment struggles and movie stars are more important headliners than solutions to problems that impede the stability of the earth. Millionaires are easy to blame, we think. Millionaires have the money to make a difference to change the world, to become philanthropists of salvation to a world in need. Millionaires are rare. The problem is with us, the “regular” person. The one too afraid of change to see that we can make a difference in this world.

Walking my dog down South Boulevard I ponder none of this, more concerned with back pain from being overweight while my friend Francois is missing. Has he gone to rescue his family from the turmoil in Kinshasa, Congo? Has he been murdered like his father? Has his family starved or died of malaria? Questions I cannot answer until I hear from him. I pray for him, for word of him, his wife, son and my goddaughter. I come home to my cooled apartment, feed my cat and dog and share the fish oil from my tuna with the animals not thinking of starving animals or people or friends. We could not bear to dwell on the sadness at all times.

Yet, how do we pray about these earthly, human, environmental challenges without taking action? Political involvement can be a part for sure but unless each of us takes the time, make the effort to change the way we live each moment, we continue to hoard, waste and abuse the gifts the earth abundantly offers. These gifts are from God for us to use in thankfulness not greed. St. Augustine stated something like this, “When you have a possession in your household that you do not use, you hoard the possession of another.” How are we hoarding things other people need?

In an effort to live more simply I have pared down my possessions and yet still have too much. I have a good job with benefits and yet somehow I still struggle to make ends meet. I can complain it is the cost of gas or this pricey city, but unless I look in the mirror of truth, I will not see that a large percentage of my finances go to self-pleasure and waste. Enjoyment is a benefit of our jobs and salaries, so I am not recommending that we spend all of our finances to save

others. I have tried that too and all it does is makes some receivers more irresponsible and the giver more poor. However, what if we chose to be better stewards of our money as well as our environment? What would happen if we ate more meals with family and friends at each other's homes rather than going to a restaurant? What would happen if we had only enough clothes to wear for one week, not an entire year? What would our world become then?

I stop writing to comb my cat, let the dog on the porch and get a glass of wine. As I brush my cat, I wonder why I am writing this. The words of the Ecclesiastical writer sing in my head, "...there is nothing new under the sun...all is vanity." There is wisdom in those words, and definitely a truth. Jesus said, "...the poor you shall always have with you," and I ask why? We discovered that socialism doesn't work well but we can't say that the free-market of democracy has an advantage either..."the poor you shall always have with you." So what are we to do, what is our purpose in life?

I ask this once again as I seek to discern what I want to do with my life. I've always wanted to serve God and God's people. That desire has not changed. I have only discovered that God can use anybody, even me. Even here and now, just as I am, sounding like a Baptist invitational hymn. One doesn't have to be a priest, nun, official religious person to be a servant of God and be faithful. So what do I want to do with my life? What does it mean to hear God say to me, "you are an artist?" How do I live that out? What am I supposed to create? How do I pay my bills? Especially my college loan for my seminary training? We have our values, our goals off-target.

I received a message from the Western NC Episcopal Diocese last week after sharing my resume and asking if there might be a job that would use my gifts. Someone promptly sent me a list of qualifications for what it would take to be a, "candidate," when all I want to be is a servant. I want to live my life in a manner that uses the gifts and abilities that God has given me so that God will be glorified with my life. Yet, I must ask myself, what does that idiom from my Baptist upbringing mean? How can I discern what will or will not, "glorify God," and even if I could discern that, there are so many people blind to the truth how could it be seen even if I do that, live that? Perhaps that is all there is, to live a faithful life that no one sees but God. Take care of your gifts, your life, and your environment while you live kindly with love and grace in your small corner of the universe. Take care. Do no harm. Love as God has loved us, sacrificially yet at the same time with integrity, not sacrificing the truth in order to make another comfortable.

That still leaves me with questions unanswered. How do I, "live my questions," as the poet Rilke suggests? It's a game of Jeopardy isn't it? We know

the answer is God, but somehow we have to know the right question to be in the game, a game where the consequence is truth or dare, life or death, win or lose and in the end, it is all vanity, nothing but a chasing after the wind. There is a truth there I don't understand yet, but at least I'm listening.

September 20, 2006

Time has passed and the weather cooler as the earth tilts away from the sun towards fall. The light of the sun is different. It's almost as if I can sense the tilt though the people around me oblivious to anything but iPods, work, and traffic, whatever distraction suits the person's fancy. I am the odd one, I know. Not these clones of society who fit in, do their job, become successes and wonder what life is all about. That's the thing we have in common, wondering what life is about. We all think there is something more somewhere. Around the corner, tomorrow, the next job, the next relationship will be better different, somehow more and better than now.

I say this without judgment but understanding. I've been there and do that myself. Yet as I get older and events in my life converge into one thought I begin to see that now is truly all we have and the Buddhists have it right. Perhaps there are Christians, Muslims and others who see this as well, but the NOW seems to be a major tenet of the Buddhists while other religions are busy hating each other or finding fault with another. In the end, again, this pondering the meaning of life, this comparing religion is vanity, a chasing after the wind for we are but dust and to dust we shall return.

In the past, hearing such talk as I just wrote, I heard nihilism or pessimism at best, wondering what in the world the bishops were thinking to include Ecclesiastes in our canon of scripture. At this point in my life, I wonder how it got there not because it is odd, but because of the profound truth that lies there. Now. What is your now and how are you living the moment of now for that is truly all we have. Today it makes me happy to say I am living the now in a beautiful way as I smell the fresh air, listen to the silence, write of my thoughts and life and love. My heart is full of love for my family, my partner, my friends and I know right in this moment that all is well. I have no control over my next breath, thought, or action. I have no control over another's decisions, thoughts, actions in the next moment, but I am not responsible for another's decisions only mine. How am I living my now? Am I living with integrity, truth, and in a manner that harms none? Tonight I can answer yes. In this moment, I can answer yes, my heart sings to God in abundant mercy and thankfulness, and nothing seems or feels in vain. There is just this moment and it is very good. All is well with my soul.

Evening Prayer

I take my shoes off. Standing on the holy ground of my sorrow the only burning is in my heart. Fire for God where is it? My spirit drained from sorrow, sadness. I understand the Psalmist, "...put my tears in your bottle..." Gone are the days of weeping and gnashing. My eyes are dry now, my sanity moves closer while the sorrow waits. I don't want to write about the blues, or talk of how someone done me wrong. The deed is done the betrayal outdated. How to move through this sorrow, this deep sadness of loss, I cannot comprehend. Stay with it, live in it, feel it. This presence not wallowing in the mud of grief or the mire of self-pity, just being present to that gaping hole in my soul where there once was a place for me in the house of God.

Cast away from my place of belonging, the only place that ever felt like home. Shunned, ridiculed, my right to speak in the house revoked. Did those actions stop my love of God or God's love for me? No, that love prevails and an even richer, stronger bond has developed. While this is well and good, I remain on the outside. Now, the betrayers welcome me in saying forget the past. Besides, they weren't the ones who did the action. What of forgiveness? I even ask this of myself but now, after all these years I look at the house from outside. A forever wall between me and what was. This is not about forgiveness or letting go I don't think. It feels like this time is learning to live within what is and letting go of what was.

Once you've tasted of the tree of knowledge, once your innocence is shattered, there is no going back. Once you've seen through the religious deception, and even worse, the self-deception, there is no unknowing it. I'm not alone in this, but one of the few who keeps trying to return, trying to make that peace with what is and not what could be. How God tolerates us is beyond my grasp.

I'm moving into my head again. An editor told me to write more from my heart, from the pain I feel inside. That was ten years ago and yet I still default to my head when writing of my feelings. What words can describe the weeping of my spirit or the depth of loss? Weeping and moaning, how many times it fails to describe the pain howling in my being. Creaking of tree limbs in wicked weather, how weak it seems to describe the weariness as my spirit seeks to lift just to get through the day. You see, I didn't lose a person. I lost a church and a way of being and living in this world.

Now as I write I see why I've tried to avoid the pain in my heart. The pain too much to bear sometimes. Words again are useless even in the face of great love. Words fail us in that which matters most. You cannot experience my joy, my sorrow, nor can I experience yours. Try as I may I cannot move this pain from within my being into a form that is understandable by humanity. I cannot even understand this which is mine, what a farce to think I can convey such so that another can understand; cannot even bear to feel it in my own being why would I put this out for another? Not tonight. Not this day.

Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy. Christe Eleison, Christ have mercy. Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy.

Present

I feel you here every day now. God in my heart Being present Spirit enlightening my shadow.

I AM In the shadow of God's wings a smaller darker shadow still loved Touched by kindness, Lifted by light

I celebrate God in you in me in this life bringing forth New life from something past the mystery of love.

Alpha & Omega

I know the beginning and the end of the story. The beginning is this: I belong to God. The end is this: I belong to God. Now, I am questioning the middle part. What do I do, “in the meantime?” Before I could even complete the last sentence, I heard the same thing again; “I belong to God.” It seems that God wants me to see that there is no other story. There is no other way. There is no other answer or goal. Nevertheless, because I am a questioning person, I have to ask the question of meaning.

What does it mean to belong to God? It means first that I am loved with a divine and unconditional love. God doesn't care that right now I have been hurtful and that I have been lost for some time. Like the prodigal son, God has been waiting in great love for me to return to the love that I know is my inheritance. Even as I walk up the road of repentance, with my story of how hard life has been and how I am only worthy to be a slave in God's house, I can feel phenomenal love pouring from God's sacred and watchful heart. I can sense that my offer will not go unnoticed, and yet know that the love of God is deeper and stronger than any mistake I might make or any error I might make by my accidental touring. The book of Romans reminds us that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God.

I belong to God, you belong to God is the same thing as saying we belong to love, “For God is Love.”(I John 4:7) Now comes the tricky question, “What is the love of God?” We see this in our scripture and especially in the life of Jesus. Because of the great love given to me, a response grows naturally in my heart and soul. What can I do for this great God of love? Jesus' words echo in my mind,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul. And the second commandment is like it, love your neighbor as yourself.”

My Heart Pours Out

My heart pours out.
The honey of God
is on my hands
not blood like before.
The Robin sings happily outside.
My namesake,
does she understand what is happening?
For I don't.

Yet, this is good somehow,
this fluid heart that is not mine
running through my fingers
Nourishment
Healing
Sweetness
Today my heart flows,
the honey of God
not my own
but good.

Morning Prayer

June 19, 2007 3:00 am

Thoughts came to mind keeping me awake after an asthma attack. First, I completed the garden in my head and then I immediately began fighting anger towards the church. I want to try to write some of this out in hope that I can find my way through this to a better understanding, in hope that I can move beyond this anger in a positive way, in hope that I might get sleep.

First, I feel resentment towards the church, the institution that expects me to attend services and pay to support it. Why the resentment? From the sixth grade, until I was removed as a pastor, I devoted my life to the church as a vehicle of God. I trusted that while the church was not God, it was in effect, a place to meet God. Didn't I find God in the church? Didn't I learn to love Jesus in the church, learn to pray, and learn to sing the songs of God? I fought my parents many times standing up for my desire to go to church up until I moved out of their house. Then I listened to them speak down to me for my commitment to the work of the church. None of that deterred me since I knew where I belonged.

What did the work of the church mean to me at the time? I led Bible studies, participated in every religious group in college as I prepared to work full-time after graduation from college. I do not regret one moment teaching, sharing, laughing, and crying about the challenges of a young and growing faith. When I graduated and found a part-time church musician's job, I took on the youth group in order to make ends meet and still had to have another full-time job. Did I regret it? No. I hated that I had to work outside of the church to make a living but there too I was learning important lessons of God. At the same time, I began to find myself alone because the long workweek and the busy church schedule left no time for friends. I worked, came home and worked on church events. My friends stopped calling somewhere in the midst of this, not because they ceased loving me, but because I was so busy doing church work I had no time left and they realized I couldn't attend whatever they requested.

I see as I write the making of my workaholicism. Not only did I wish to serve God and love God's people, there was an anxiety driving me. The pain of my childhood scar and the fear of my sexuality led me to work in a frenzy...if nothing else, I would prove to God I was worthy of God's love. Even though my life was continually filled with the gift of free love from God, there was an underlying message I received from my upbringing that I was not good enough

for God and therefore had to win God's favor. As if I could, but I did try. From the time I was a child, I had a special love of God, a gift I suppose because it was though I could always see God in all things. Nevertheless, the love of God, that concept of agape—unconditional love was something I had no way of discerning. Sure, it was easy for me to love God because after all, God is God, is omnipotent, and is the embodiment of the WORD. But how could that enfleshed word love me when I had so many flaws?

So why do I feel resentment when the workaholism was my doing? The church saw me as a willing servant (and I was) and so the church used me, and used me and used me. Then, as I began to have the beginnings of health challenges, told me I wasn't doing enough. I gave up my time, energy and love because I loved them, because I loved God. I didn't care about me anymore. I thought it was a step towards being godly, towards being the selfless servants of God I admired so much, those who inspired me to live a better life. After my first church decided I didn't do enough (meaning 5 choirs and two active youth groups in addition to a full-time job), I decided to get out of the church, to take a break. I wanted to reconnect with my friends and spend time with my family, especially since my grandma Whitley was dying. I found I was lost. I don't think a full year passed before I returned to work in the church and that soon led to my seeking ordination. None of this I regret. I followed my heart as God led me. I regret not one moment.

I gave up my well-paying job, my first home. Years of study, years of hearing my faith challenged and scripture reduced to nothing, years of being analyzed and graded and still I regret not one moment. My life is better, richer, fuller for each challenge of faith, for each moment of nothingness and pain those years bought for each year God was revealed in various ways. I waited a year for ordination (I was a woman without the physical attributes needed to preach) and the ordination was my wedding to God, the beginning of my ministry full of hope and promise.

It is in the first year of my ministry that I found regret. Not for serving God or loving God's people, but for not knowing how to say no when my physical being could not continue. I regret not having enough self-worth to see the damage my inability to say no was causing to my health. I set a pattern that all came to expect. They called and I came. A meeting was occurring and I attended. The choir director quit so I directed the choir too. The senior pastor needed a three-month sabbatical so I prayed and took it on with the assistance of the lay ministers. I do not regret loving those people, being a part of their lives, serving God. I regret that in that year and a half I worked myself so hard my body will never be the same. I resigned to try to recover my health. I came out to

my bishop and here is where the resentment comes in for me. After all those years and all that love, the church erased me from its book. The official letter told me I was, “removed from the roster,” and then proceeded to tell me how I could not wear my vestments, preach or in any way represent the Lutheran church. The Episcopal Church and the Lutheran church were in ecumenical agreements at the time and the Episcopal Church a few months later denied homosexuals the right to be a pastor.

While I understand that stance has changed, (and is why I keep trying to return to church through the Episcopal Church), I cannot deny that I resent the institutions for playing god. I also know a part of me is just darn fearful. You see, I loved the people I served. Regardless of their age at times, it felt they were my children, these people wanting to meet God and walk a sacred path. There is that part of me that longs to return to the way I loved the church, but I am wary now. I have no trust of the institution, and yes, I KNOW the real church is the people. However, you see, even the people who loved me and believed in me, well only a few stood up for me. Why? Because they trusted the institution more than their heart, because they were afraid to stand up and risk being seen as visibly supporting me.

“We’ve never done it that way before,” were more important than taking an unpopular stand. I tried to be kind to each person who told me all the reasons they didn’t speak out but it hurt even more that they couldn’t see I lost all that mattered to me. That is, except for that which matters most—God. God is more present than ever. However, when it came down to the wire, the church removed me from the roster and I ceased to exist for the church. I never received any follow-up letters (though a representative of the bishop spoke with me trying to convince me to speak of my sin and grovel at the bishop’s feet).

I was removed from the Lutheran Magazine’s mailing list, though still a member at first. It was as if I had never lived that life as church musician, church youth director, and pastor. Seminary seemed some kind of holy dream, not a reality. The church got rid of me. This is why I have problems attending now and I don’t have a clue on how to resolve the issue, and each time I attend, I remember...

Authentic Love

My cat, Egypt, loved drinking fresh water. So much so that when the cat drank she usually had water all over her chin making a water beard that caused her people to laugh. She would drink deeply then lift her head to watch out for attacks from her new friend Otter. Drink, then watch. Leaving the upstairs bathroom, she walks over to the rail to look down into the living room; the water drop lingers on her chin. She leans over the rail, looks down into the living room and there she sees me, “mama.” Egypt leans her head out farther to check out a movement at my feet and she sees Otter moving in on her mama’s space. Egypt quickly pulls her head back through the rail to run and chase Otter away from my feet.

Splat. A drop of water falls on my forehead, on the Christ mark, the place of baptism, and awakens me. I must have fallen asleep somewhere in the day. I lift up my head and wipe the water from my brow. At least I hope it’s water. Looking up at the loft, I wonder where the water dropped from upstairs. Egypt chases Otter from under my feet and Feather is asleep on the chair, so the cats are not upstairs. I am awake now, not in a spiritual awakening sense, and yet, somewhere in the nap something inside my psyche or emotions shifted. Rubbing my neck, I slowly walk up the stairs to make sure none of the vases were knocked over at DJ’s desk upstairs.

“Step away from the anxiety, keep your hands over your head,” DJ spoke to me in jest using the announcer voice or the voice others use on television cop mysteries when the robbers were apprehended. That’s what anxiety does, robs the life out of each beautiful moment. Walking up the stairs, I hear DJ’s strong voice speaking to the anxious part of me in the moment and I laugh. There is nothing more healing than authentic love.

Stonehard

The pain
the betrayal
too much to bear.

After years
and years of abuse
neglect
disregard,

one event sucked the life out of my heart;
blood turning to gravel going through the motions of a rolling stone getting
harder through the day stonehard stoneheart petrified soul to protect myself.
when will it be enough?

Then You call to me through the stone-hard wall of protection. Not afraid of
you I listen but still hurt, still protective, still confused about the why. Your voice
gentle vibrations against stone. Your love healing waters pouring over the stone
gentle, warm, soothing love caressing the stone angel kisses melt stone till once
again life flows blood surges through flesh softening my heart. Breathing
restored shows me life Pneuma God breathing Life into the adamah.

Yahweh,
the happening God,
reviving me from the
dead once again
Through you.

Anniversary

October first approaches the twelfth anniversary of my installment as the associate pastor at Advent Lutheran Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. During this month is also when the bishop forced my resignation from the Lutheran Church or face charges of sexual misconduct. Ten years have passed. This year, this week, the Episcopal Church of America and the Episcopal church of Africa are arguing over if I have a right to be a Christian leader or have a right for God to bless my relationship. The report makes it sound as if the American Episcopal church is backing away from not only the first gay bishop, Gene Robinson, but also to stop the support of women as bishops, such as the current presiding bishop.

I began to rid myself of the remainder of my preacher reference books yesterday. Already donated one third of my library to St. Peters in Charlotte. God lightened my load of more of those books when I left Oklahoma, because I didn't leave them willingly. Not sure what to do with the robe or my stoles, but God will show the way. Now it's time to let go of more dead weight. "...we believe in the resurrection of the dead..."

So what remains after the removal of the church? What remains is the cream of life. My ordination cannot be revoked. My true friends remain glittering golden as light. And love? Love is all there is really. Love of my family, my partner, my pets and best of all – GOD. In my days, God has been the sun and in the night, the white light, for even darkness is as light to God. God is love and love remains. I am blessed more than ever.

Time

When you look at the seconds of a minute, actually watch the clock hand move, you realize how slowly time moves. Perhaps as kids, all we did was watch the clock until the next exciting thing came time. Time seemed so slow and the next good thing a forever away. This weekend of my mother-in-law's 86th birthday has flown by and as Sunday evening winds down to another workday, the days seem like breaths. Breathe in the goodness of life, another day has passed. As we age, time and those moments we try to capture are valued in a different way.

Something weighs beautifully on my heart after this weekend of celebrating life. So many dreams and prayers are true and realized in this life I share with DJ and her mother. My creativity is appreciated and free here. My dreams, suppressed for so long, are rampant with hope and growth. Project upon project turns in my head, in my heart. My dreams at night return to a dream growing larger and deeper in this place. I look at all the other dreams and they seem like trinkets, glittering things I collect like an old crow. The one real beautiful place is here – family with DJ, our pets and her mother. Family here that somehow draws me nearer still to my family in the Piedmont of North Carolina. Whether playing music, watching my beloved read or listening to the deep chimes outside, the day begins with us and our pets gathered round the breakfast table. The day ends with hugs to all, reading, and silence. This journey out of the closet and down the road to God is more precious each day. I'm not saving the world but I am clear on this, God is saving me.

Flower in the Rain

I think of this morning
and the smile you gave me as you drove away.
A flower in rain,
your smile reminded me of all that is good.
All that I want
is this beautiful life with you.
Serving God is part of us
and I never knew life could be so beautiful,
a flower in the rain.
The love you give me continues to flower
Hope blooms.

Three Dog Night

Rhododendron blooms glow bright in the night.
Moonlight over the mountain shines.

The Artist

This journey began as a search to be an artist. I must admit that I still have no idea what that means for me. Yes, I know the general meaning of the word, artist, but when you seek definition in your own life, the word is a broad term, not one giving a specific direction. All you can do is pack up your bags, throw in the writing tools, the painting tools, take your guitar and a keyboard, then get on the path. Sounds like a lot of baggage doesn't it? I'll admit there have been stops on the path to unpack the baggage and leave behind the sorrow, the grudges, and the pain. It's not as if one forgets, because that pain, sorrow, anger has colored your life, but it doesn't have to bring you down. I'm still a bit tired so if my grammar isn't exact there's a reason. When I'm tired, my country comes out in me. I always seek to speak in an intelligent manner where all can understand me, but hopefully not condescending. I am human however and prone to err. At least when I speak country style, it's just sloppy. Growing up I loved living in the country where there were woods and fields, where dirt roads were a kid's heaven for bike riding or going for a walk with your dog. The solitude of the country where crickets sang lullabies and the stars kissed you goodnight was exactly the place I wanted to be as a child.

I lived in a small community in North Carolina. We lived in the community named after a natural salt lick. A church was built on top of the lick, a smart idea if I do say so myself, a constant reminder of, "You are the salt of the earth." My babysitter went there, but we went to a Baptist church in another country setting. As I write of these places, I see faces of the beautiful people I knew when growing up, most of them are still alive but there are some that have finally passed away into God's land.

I don't think I can honestly say I was ever ashamed of this community because there was integrity, goodness, a kindness rich with life, love and meaning that I know I could not have experienced anywhere else. When I got to college though, I realized how limited my country education was because of the poor county of farmers and millworkers. We had books, we learned the basics, but there was only one foreign language to choose, the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic along with science and a little music. Yes, the education sufficient, just not as broad as my city friends I learned. They could choose between Spanish, French, German or Latin with most of them starting in elementary or junior high. There were choices between orchestra and band.

Electives were varieties of math, science or reading but branched out from there into psychology, sociology, sciences beyond the basics, statistics and opportunities galore. I was not ashamed of my community but there was a certain sense of inadequacy.

Now, as I listen to others speak and take the earth, sky and nature for granted, I realize that my background was not inadequate, just different. My eyes focus on the land, the water, the wildlife in ways that are only born of experience. How many know the beauty of sitting on a porch listening to the sound of wooden rockers on old squeaky boards while the wind swishes through the wheat in the field? I can hear it still after thirty or more years.

Tears of Joy

I heard the song in years gone by. Jazzy, joyful singing a lover's promise. So many sad tears and tears of pain I could not imagine tears of joy.

Love has come and love has gone. In each one I looked for the lover's song I found more tears of sadness and pain that never left and never waned. I wanted no more pain or lovers who vainly proclaimed devotion when the word is a mystery, an unknown word hiding in some ancient dictionary.

Each day now, I sit in silence, listening to the wind, feeling the love of my furry friends, hearing the beating of my own heart, and today there are joyful tears in my eyes.

I question myself wherein the source lies These tears feel so different today. So subtle that only the most observant would see them. Yet they stream with power in my soul. As I listen to beautiful music, my mind runs over the landscape of my present reality and suddenly I know tears of joy come from inside me.

Art and Past History

Ah, here I am hoping to write again and my breaking heart leaves me speechless. Not a good thing for a writer. Yet, somehow these new truths must be spoken and questions asked of those of us responsible (if only indirectly through ancestry).

I now live near Qualla Boundary, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee tribe, in North Carolina. Sol Moccasin, a Cherokee lay minister, had told me great things of Living Waters Lutheran Church when I was in seminary. Then, when I was a pastor, he came and shared the stories of the Cherokee and Christianity with our student group when I was a chaplain at UNC-Charlotte. He told us how the crucifix was used as an instrument of oppression rather than hope in the midst of suffering. He gently explained other errors of the religious against Native Americans as well as telling us beautiful stories of his people. When he spoke, you could feel love, warmth, kindness.

At the time, I was a pastor and a university chaplain so didn't have extra time for historical research. Searching for Sol Moccasin in 1997, I discovered he had returned to his family in Oklahoma. At the time, I was in a wild, dark wilderness and thought he might have answers that the church itself could not give. I was sad I could not speak with him. Three years later, I moved to Tecumseh, OK, not to look for Sol, but because it seemed the thing to do at the time, yet there was a hope I could run across his path. Hadn't our paths crossed several times in different ways through the years of seminary and my pastorate? Nothing was impossible.

Oklahoma is not a pretty place and sadness covers the ground. Perhaps it is because of the tears that still trail down the highways and dirt roads there. The Cherokee people were originally from the lush green places of Western North and South Carolina. Green is everywhere you look with beautiful sky, trees and clear water. Oklahoma, flat and brown, was desolate in comparison to me. As I searched for a job there, people suspiciously stated, "You're from North Carolina? But it's so pretty and green there, why would you come here?" That wasn't a question really but a statement on my sanity that should have been a red flag. After two years of pain and struggle, I concluded that Oklahoma was a sad place because they took beautiful, spiritual Native Americans and forced them into unfriendly territory, a prison of nothing. I had to come back here where the green promised hope and family. I was not tough enough for Oklahoma

wilderness.

Years passed before I moved here, only fourteen miles from Cherokee. The boundary is much smaller than the original nation the Cherokee had. Somewhere in the midst of this, I got interested in researching ancestry and everywhere there was the story of Native Americans, Cherokee and Catawba and Occoneechee/Saponi, being forced from their land so the whites could have it. Pain, loss, and greed creating a swath of historical pain that I don't want to own. I've always loved the Native American culture and spirituality.

Then, unexpectedly, the pastor from Living Waters in Cherokee asked me to preach when she was on vacation. I had decided no way. No way could I do this, stupid white woman that I am; how could I teach these kind people. Nevertheless, the day she requested, October 5th, was the anniversary of my installation as a pastor and I saw it as a sign. God was redeeming my past and perhaps God would use even me in the service. Therefore, I said, yes, I will come and participate with Living Waters.

Later that week, there was a festival of the Southeastern Band of Native Americans. I heard there would be dancing so my partner and I went to see and hear and love them. As an amateur photographer, I took my camera in hopes of finally being able to capture something unique that expressed my love of the Native American people. At the festival there were Choctaw, Creek and Cherokee who were dancing, and I took the pictures not knowing, just loving what I saw. Dancing into my eyes and heart there on the stage of the Tribal Grounds were the Cherokee, Creek and Choctaw dancing a dance of friendship.

When we returned home, I discovered I had the first decent photos of people I had ever taken. The dancing, the kindness, somehow it came into the photos and I knew it wasn't me, it was the Native Americans. The more I experimented with digitally enhancing photos, the more excited I came about the art and my friends on the Redbubble site, (www.redbubble.com), loved them, the photos and the people too. I didn't know how long pain could last, and yet, how could I be so blind.

A few days after my posting the art, someone asked me to remove them from the site. The action requested was not due to current politics, but to protect the people...and I meant them no harm. Nevertheless, with this history, one that is so violent of whites killing Cherokee, Shawnee, Saponi, massacres of entire tribes, how could I not see the pain so near? The woman was firm as she explained and listened as I apologized for my error, and now I even see my own insensitivity. She offered kindness as I begged forgiveness.

I called the pastor at Living Waters and told her I would understand if she must ask someone else to preach in my place. Stupid white woman with good

intentions makes egregious error a week beforehand. Still, the pastor wanted me to preside, and I was afraid I would make another white woman error. Thank goodness, Wankan Tankan stepped in and the Great Spirit took charge. Sunday has now come and gone and there were mistakes of not knowing but none so painful. Here is the beauty of it all.

Sunday, October 5th, 2008, Living Waters Cherokee church embraced their spirit as we sang Amazing Grace in English and Cherokee. The children blessed the others with sage and kindness. I heard stories of survival, not only of the church but a great grandmother hiding in a cave during the removal and victory over addiction. On the bulletin board of their church was a photo of the bishop who removed me because I was a lesbian. The people told me their stories of pain and in comparison, mine was nothing. Communion came and suddenly two children asked to help. The young girl shared the bread and the young boy the wine and we were all crying for joy, touched by these Native American children of hope. We all shared the importance of remembering. Remembering who we are and whose we are. The day ended with a final unstated but clear reminder of WHO is in charge and it's not me or the church or the bishop, but the Spirit above and beyond us all.

The gentle giants of the Anikituhwa warriors dance in my memory with colors of spirit and grace. My mind's memory hears the sound of the turtle shell rattlers of the Creek Stomp dancers rhythmic "tsch tsch tsch" while the leader sings in Creek. Counterclockwise they dance, hand in hand with children and the elderly. Swirls of color weave in my vision's memory of beads and ribbons, sky and tree. Brown eyes of children watching and listening to the story of "Old Turtle" feel like the eye of God looking into me, my soul, my heart. I did not see the elder take his branch of sage, yet I was told about him and my mind's eye...or my spirit's eye, can see him as he pinches a piece of the leaf, rubs it between his thumb and forefinger and smells sage blessings while we worship and pray.

At the end of the day, the history, the artless mistake of humanity pales in comparison to the mercy. I walk outside to pick up the sage basket as another child picks up a handful of cornmeal. At age three, she feels the cornmeal in her hand curiously. Does her family remember the dance, remember the blessings? I ask her what she is most thankful for from the earth and without hesitation, this girl child releases the cornmeal blessing on the ground saying, "flowers," while a lemon colored rose watches her.

Come

Leave the dishes in the sink,
the dirty things in the laundry.
Come to the sound of my voice.
Morning falls, the day begins
as light comes to your eyes.
Like a cat purring her heart of love,
I come to wait for you.
Won't you sit with me for a while?
Hear my spirit breathe through
your darkness?
Won't you wait with me for the dawn?
Come to the sound of my voice.
I wait for you.

What I Know

As I contemplate today, my niece lays in a hospital, twenty years old, with pneumonia. My cousin writes me and says, "Send me recordings of your carols. I need your voice for comfort." I sit down with my guitar and tape recorder. Wind howls around the house and shakes the heavy chimes. The sky is gray as it tries to rain, tries to snow, the sky can't decide. Playing carols, my voice cracks from the weather's indecision. Old paper sounds that no one will listen to will they? How could this comfort my cousin, yet as I sing, there my family gathers in my heart 'round that old piano. Singing, looking into each other's brown eyes, singing songs of hope, love and life different from what it is. Remembering love at grandma's when everything was magic at least for that day, that evening of song and lights.

Reading the life essays of a Metizo, my heart weeps for yet another "Indian," who has lost his country at the hands of the United States, at the hands of the European. What do I know that can make this world better? Today I do not know. Living Waters Lutheran Church asks me to play guitar for them, help their music, "they love your singing." They are Cherokee, the Eastern band. What can a song do? What song can return heritage laid waste? Can I sing a song to stop the pain, the suffering, the wars and killing? What sound can be made that moves humanity to kindness?

Songs and poetry and dreams, this is what I know. Thoughts of God and spirit, these thoughts occupy my heart and mind, motivate my actions. I can only pray that I do no harm with my "good intentions". What are songs, poetry, and dreams against guns, global warming, hatred and terrorism? There are artists and theologians in history who have become activists, but it was not their songs nor their poetry or theological musings that changed the world, or was it?

Surrender

An artist friend started something this morning. Her photograph brought forth a memory of surrender, a memory of recognizing the goodness in surrender in a world when the word has come to mean weakness rather than strength. She focused on surrender. How ironic that she associated John Denver's song, "Sweet Surrender," with her photograph of an old farm. As our society "progresses" more and more of our farmland, our wilderness areas and the beauty of nature is surrendered to the hard cold reality of pavement. See, even I am now focused on the harsher meaning of the word surrender. Of course, it doesn't help that when there is a war movie or story somewhere there is talk of surrender as part of losing a battle. Even our own government alludes to this fear of surrender in current talks about Iraq.

The beauty in the artist's work is that she reminds us of something we all need in this day and time and that is to surrender to something beautiful. The words were not words of losing a battle, but of discovering something bigger than war, embracing something more than yesterday. When we lie in the arms of our loved one, we surrender the self, body and soul to our love. When we surrender to life there is a vulnerability that is scary because life is so unpredictable and without control. We think that by fighting and resisting we are winning some existential war when all we are really doing is hindering our life from growth. Surrender. Stop fighting your panty hose, stop fighting traffic, and just let things be for today. Breathe, surrender to the fresh air or at least the fact that you can breathe. Surrender is about letting go of a specified, controlled end. So what if you aren't the lawyer, teacher, doctor that your parent wanted, are you at least fully YOU? If not, surrender to the reality that you are enough, just as you are. What was your reaction to that statement? Even though I know the beauty of surrender, there is also much trust in the act, the thought of acting even. When I wrote, "surrender to the reality that you are enough just as you are," my heartbeat raced. Perhaps it is excitement racing in my heart that after all these years I might just get it; understand that surrendering to my life is good. Right now, it feels a little more like fear, but doesn't the newest adventure make your heart race a little in fear too? Fear of the unknown, fear of failure, fear of success, there are so many things we can allow to trap us and keep us from life.

Surrender. Give it up. Let today be today with no expectations. Trust yourself. Allow others to just be. Surrender to the goodness of now. Surrender to

the fact that even if now is difficult you are still here, still breathing and that is a good, blessed event. Surrender. Kinda scary, somewhat exciting. Go ahead, try something new, surrender.

silence

You have to be careful with silence. In silence you may hear
your darkness,
your pain.

You have to be careful with silence.
that cuts through illusion to truth.

When it cuts, it hurts like death,
though the death of an illusion is
a birth of truth and life.

You have to be careful with silence,
for there in that
still

quiet

place

you may find yourself...

then know that you are loved.

A Day In the Life Of A Lesbian (June Sunday)

The dog goes with me to check the garden. As we go out the back door, I see the sunflower seeds I forgot to plant. Walking into the bright morning I chuckle as the dog chases the lizard living in the wall of railroad ties that lead down the hill. The big, old dog turns into a prancing, hopping puppy her eyes big and white with excitement. I could swear she smiles each time. She hops, the lizard escapes and the dog smells the place where the lizard hides between the ties. In the garden, the plants keep their gifts silent and to themselves, hidden mysteries in the earth, in the vine and blossom. The snow peas are still too young, so young I think I can see sunlight x-rays of barely formed peas lined up peacefully in translucent green pods. The pods hang proudly, green ornaments of the summer holiday of life and food and sun.

I pull up some grass sprouts in the periwinkle and see small blackberry and nightshade as it grows thorny. I reach to pull, weed the brambles, but my bare fingers remember the pain of the last barehanded attempt to weed, my fingers prickly with pain. I decide to stick to weeding the easier, thornless weeds this morn. It is Sunday after all, and I suddenly remember my mama telling me not to plant things on Sunday. "They won't grow," she said then adds, "it's an old wives tale, but my mama always told me that and I believe it. Don't you?"

The lavender and petunia flowers planted earlier in the spring over our cat's grave flourish and the new violas are peeping above the ground. Egypt was a sweet, impish cat, black like the dog but with bright green eyes. She loved to eat my plants and was especially fond of violas. As I thought about which plants to plant over my beloved cat, I realized that she also liked to eat purple flowers, the violets in the house, the pansies and violas in the city. So I planted purple. The lobelia is not thriving and as I checked the plant's roots, I was saddened at the sight of a roly-poly bug, a reminder that my once lively cat returns to the earth.

The tomato plants stand tall without blossom or fruit. I wonder if something is wrong or is it again, just too early for the mountains. Deciding to pick the two ripe snow peas, I know DJ's mom will like a taste. Crisp and sweet to taste, she taught us the taste of uncooked snow peas straight from the garden. No butter, salt or water, just pure snow pea crunching fresh in your mouth. As I close the gate to the garden, I see the new rosemary thriving and give thanks to God.

The sun shines down hot this noon and I can feel the steam of the June day rise. The day of solstice, first day of summer. The dog sniffs a bug in the grass

then runs to the top of the hill ready to get her hot black coat back into the cool of the house. Some insect buzzes nearby and the leaves make a whisper. I see the sunflower seeds again and wonder if it's too late for planting. Can they make it before the mountain frost returns?

Sitting down beside DJ, I hear the breeze outside as it moves faster now, the chimes ding gently in the wind. The beauty of this day is filled with the pulse of life. Beating on the leaves of the wind, on my heart. In the beauty of this solitude, I write, but soon we are laughing at our young cat, Grayson, as he attacks the sliding glass door. An outside bug torments him. Trying to capture the bug he drums his paws quickly on the glass, a musical yet funny sound coming from his fast movement, then crashes into the blinds, running away as we laugh.

Mountains

Mountains, speak to me.
Tell me of God.
Reclining on the horizon peacefully,
the moon rises from your breast.
What things do you have to teach?
You lie there silently and in your silence
there is power.
Mountains, you are still.
Winds whisper around your body.
In sensuous stillness there is longing for God.
God comes in the still quiet,
kissing the face of the earth
a lover.
Mountains, you are strong.
Confident in your value you lie in wait for God.
No thoughts distract you from your vision.
Your vision is only of God:
the wide blue heavens above,
the deep brown earth beneath.
You are rock and tree, building blocks of the universe,
foundation for the kingdom of heaven.

Conclusion

My first impulse is to say there is no conclusion, because the journey to God is always a beginning, a continuance. The goal is to be on the journey and not to reach a destination on the path of faith. At the same time, I am just returning from a weekend celebration of my old friends' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. These are people I have known since high school and their family was the only thing good about my high school experience. The irony was that we all worked at a fish camp (the name southerners use for a restaurant whose main menu is seafood) and the man and woman who ran it are good Christian people and their children are following a good path. It was their daughter Kelly's anniversary celebration and as I talked with Kelly and her husband, J.W., I found myself wishing I had been brave enough in high school to talk to Kelly and J.W. about my views, my life.

As we talked and caught up on the past twenty-five years, it was clear that we all picked up where we left off in the friendship – with laughter, respect and love. True friends are that way, you are never far from true friends and love is the constant. At the celebration, there were people who were from my high school, college and work that I knew during those difficult years of changing from a child, to a teen and then into young adulthood and who I never knew would care about me if I had come out to them as lesbian at that time. I was too afraid. Now, I speak to them and they are so loving and would have been then, too, had I only known. To add to that beauty, I also have the love of my family, my parents, my sister and her children.

Here is the conclusion for me; I now conclude that in our lives, God reclaims any part of our lives that we are willing to hand over, and then some. When J.W. and Kelly first asked me to preside at their ceremony I had no intention of coming out to them. They had loved me as I was. What would happen if they knew the truth, the real truth of me? Then, as they confided in me and spoke of their joy and who would be there at the ceremony I felt my truth calling me to courage and in that act of telling, sharing my heart and my life, the great love of God reclaimed that past of mine as good too. Now, not only do I have old friendship renewed, I have the blessing of a continued friendship with this family and the knowledge that God is once again laughing at my silliness as if to say, "See, I was watching over you and loving you all along." Life gets better every day. Love abounds. The road to God, the house of Beth-el is full of

adventure and lessons but there is always love, “Faith, hope and love remain... and the greatest of these is love.”

On My Journy, Mount Zion African American Spiritual

*On my journey now, Mount Zion / Well I wouldn't take nothing, Mount Zion /
For my journey now, Mount Zion One day, one day, I was walking along / Well,
the elements opened an' de love come down, Mount Zion I went to de valley an' I
didn't go to stay / Well, my soul got happy an' I stayed all day, mount Zion Just
talk about me, just as much as you please / Well, I'll talk about you when I bend
on my knees, Mount Zion On my journey now, Mount Zion / Well I wouldn't take
nothing, Mount Zion / For my journey now, Mount Zion.*

Postlogue

While this manuscript was being considered for submission for publication and being reviewed by the editor, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) has reversed its stance on gays and lesbians serving in the church as pastors. At its National Assembly in August of 2009, the national body of the ELCA voted for full inclusion of monogamous gays and lesbians into the clergy roll. Since that time, in April of 2010, the ELCA has promised to reinstate all disenfranchised gay and lesbian pastors. The ELCA has also begun to offer benefits to partners of current clergy who are gay and lesbian.

“Thanks Be To God”

“If I’ve learned anything, it’s that we ain’t meant for perfection. We was put here to do our best and love one another, and there is such a thing as good enough.”

Marvella in “Moon Women” by Pamela Duncan

Notes

1. "The St. Louis Jesuits, a group of Catholic musicians who popularized a contemporary style of church music through their compositions and recordings in the 1970s and 1980s. The group, originally made up of Jesuit seminarians at St. Louis University, used acoustic guitars and pop-style melodies and rhythms to set biblical and other religious texts to music sung in English as a result of the liturgical reforms initiated by Vatican II. Without intent, a groundswell of popularity took place when visiting seminarians took stenciled mimeographed copies of their new music back to their communities where it became known as music by The St. Louis Jesuits." (08No) Wikipedia

2. Vision and Expectations — Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" is a document which informs candidates for ordained ministry in this church, seminaries, congregations and candidacy committees regarding this church's vision for ordained ministry and the high expectations it places on those who serve in this way.

3. A synod is a council convened to discuss ecclesiastical business. The ELCA divides the US into 64 different synods for church business.

4. Historic evidence indicates that St. John's Lutheran Church was established in the early 1740s, although 1745 is generally accepted as the date of the first organized activity.

5. For more information on the program go to <http://www.acpe.edu>

6. "Dark Night of the Soul (Spanish: La noche oscura de la alma) is a treatise written by Spanish poet and Roman Catholic mystic Saint John of the Cross. It has become an expression used to describe a phase in a person's spiritual life, a metaphor for a certain loneliness and desolation. It is referenced by spiritual traditions throughout the world." Wikipedia

7. The Orthodox Way, By Kallistos Ware, Published by St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979, pages 80-82.

8. Romans 8:28

9. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), founded in 1847 in Missouri, is the eighth largest Protestant denomination in the United States, and the second largest Lutheran body in the U.S. after the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is a moderate conservative, Confessional Lutheran denomination with German immigrant roots. For more information please visit <http://www.lcms.org>

10. Ordination is a special service within the Christian church where a person is set apart (ordained) to be a minister.

A Synod is a regional area demographic in the Lutheran Church headed up by a local bishop. Some Synods are created from multiple states or areas. The North Carolina is large enough to be its own Synod with its own bishop.

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12. A strip of cloth put over the shoulders of many pastors signifying that the ordained person wears the “yoke” of God.

13. The Mission is based on events surrounding the Treaty of Madrid in 1750, in which Spain ceded part of Jesuit Paraguay to Portugal.

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